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## FAQ#7: Why were Chinese people so angry about the attempts to seize the torch in the international torch relay?

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By Susan Brownell

I have just returned from five days in the earthquake disaster zone in Sichuan province, where I was a member of the "People's Olympic Education Promotion Team" that visited Deyang city to conduct "Youth Olympic Games Re-enactments" at six local primary and secondary schools. There I realized that for the people we encountered, The Torch is a sacred object. I call it The Torch because that is what they called it – 火炬 – as if there were only one, and no further adjectives were necessary.

The project expressed the mission of Donnie Pei, a professor at the Capital Institute of Physical Education and Zhou Chenguang, a primary school p.e. teacher, to take the Olympics to the grassroots (discussed in my previous posting). Pei could not come with us, so our team leader was Zhou. The member who attracted the most attention everywhere was Sun Yiyong, songwriter and a torchbearer during the Inner Mongolia torch relay, who was called simply The Torchbearer (火炬手)。The other members, who paled next to his luminance, consisted of [Wu Ji'an, China's "King of Games,"](#) who creates and collects games and teaches them to schoolchildren and teachers nationwide; Zhou's son Bowen; myself; and three support staff. We came from Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu and Deyang and were self-funded but for the "soft implements" (discus, javelin, hammer, hurdles, and epees made out of flexible packing foam) funded by the Haidian District government in Beijing. Thus, we were a determined "people's" (民间) group and not an "official" (官方) group. As Zhou put it to the local city officials, we were the three "have nots": have no organization, no discipline, and no funding. Such a group had probably never been seen in the area before in this form, although the earthquake relief effort had accustomed the locals both to NGOs and to roaming foreigners.

We were received – initially, as we realized, with considerable skepticism – by the Education Bureau of the Deyang city government as part of its current work in "psychological intervention." As the reality of post-disaster life is setting in, children are realizing that they have no parents for whom to study hard, parents whose lives revolved around their one child feel that have no reason to live, people who lost limbs are realizing that they are a burden on their families, and volunteers are suffering post-traumatic stress syndrome from what they saw. And so there are starting to be suicides. As a result, a major initiative in psychological intervention is being carried out in the schools and communities, utilizing Young Pioneers counselors, visiting expert psychologists (including foreign experts), and others.

Our assigned task was to bring the Olympic spirit into the schools in order to aid the recovery. When we arrived, we were received by the Chief of the Students Section, Mr. Zeng. He told us with intensity, "I hope that we can do our best to solve the conflicts as fast as possible. Of course we cannot solve all the conflicts. But let us do our best to solve the ones that we can solve." As we concluded our dinner, he told us, "You cannot fail."

The next day we drove to the disaster zone and saw the site of the collapsed school where 50 of 200 students had survived, pile after pile of brick rubble, acres of newly-created pre-fabricated communities, and the clocktower in Hanwang whose clock had stopped at 2:28. We spontaneously stopped at one of the schools that had been relocated into a pre-fab complex because their school building had collapsed, and there I first observed the power of The Torch.

Each torchbearer gets to keep the torch that he or she carried, minus its internal mechanism. Because it was a National Treasure, Sun Yiyong carried it with him everywhere he went, inside its special box cradled in a yellow silk case sewn by his mother, which he slung over his shoulder. As he told us, “When I got my own torch it was not at all like the others. It’s like your own child – you feel differently toward it compared to the others, it’s special.” When we introduced ourselves to some of the students standing in the concrete walkway between the pre-fab classrooms, they wanted to see The Torch. Sun Yiyong took it carefully out of its box and the students began to crowd around to touch it. They started streaming out of their pre-fab classrooms. To allow each student a chance, Zhou asked them to line up and pass it from hand to hand until each student had touched it. Because we were taking them away from their classes, we apologized to the teachers who came to see what was up, and left as they asked us to come back.

The next day at the sports field of the Oriental Power Primary School we conducted our first Youth Olympic Games re-enactment for 1,000 of the 3,000 students at the school, building on the model developed by Pei and Zhou at Yangfangdian Primary School in Beijing. We played our “meet song” – “Pass on the Flame’s Spark,” which Sun had written as a eulogy to the Olympic torchbearers, and conducted a little opening ceremony, following the protocol common in China. My role was to be the International Person. I delivered a short address in Chinese, in which I said that the Olympic spirit is a spirit of mutual respect, mutual understanding, fair play, and the pursuit of international friendship and world peace. As a member of big family of the global village, I sincerely wished them success in rebuilding their happy homes, and hoped that the Olympic spirit of “swifter, higher, stronger” would help them in their effort.

After the flagbearer entered the stadium bearing the Olympic education banner designed by Zhou and Pei, the Olympic Angel, Zhou’s son Bowen, entered in a white robe adorned with real feather wings and a green wreath on his head. The Olympic Angel was an inspiration of Donnie Pei, who wondered how to reduce the philosophy of Olympism to a level understandable by primary school students. He believed that Olympism should make you into a good person, and that an angel embodies goodness. Also, the white robe and wings recall the figures of Nike, winged god of victory, in the athletic scenes on ancient Greek amphora. For him, the angel symbolized ancient Greece and was not a Christian symbol. And so as our Olympic angel entered the stadium carrying a cardboard reproduction of the Olympic torch, it was announced that it was bringing the flame, symbolizing hope, from Mount Olympus in ancient Greece to China.

Finally, The Torchbearer entered the stadium, wearing his red-and-white official torchbearer’s shirt and shorts and carrying the real Lucky Clouds torch, images that were easily identified by the children because the real torch relay was being broadcast daily on Chinese TV as it passed through China. Deyang had originally been scheduled for a stop, but it had been eliminated after the earthquake, a source of great regret to local residents. Sichuan had been moved so that it was the last province on the relay before the torch returned to Beijing. As a result, ours was the first Torch to reach Sichuan. But the local education officials were looking forward to the fact that after the relay left Sichuan, Deyang would have its own Torches, since several locals had been designated to carry it.

What happened next took us all by surprise. A high-pitched cry of excitement rose into the air as the children recognized The Torch, and one thousand children began spontaneously streaming toward it. They surrounded Sun Yiyong as he rounded the field and for a while they were allowed to follow, but they began pressing so hard to get near and touch The Torch that it became difficult for him to move and he was afraid he was going to step on a child. The situation was rapidly becoming dangerous. The school’s p.e. teacher (p.e. teachers are the ones who keep order in Chinese schools, since they lead the recess exercises) grabbed the microphone and began shouting, “Children! Maintain order!”

Eventually order was restored, and Sun Yiyong walked the periphery of the crowd while the students looked without touching. But we had learned a lesson. At subsequent events, a group of four boys clothed in red and yellow T-shirts jogged with

him and acted as bodyguards for The Torch, as had the Blue Men who were so maligned in the Western media during the international torch relay. For these boys it was an honor to protect The Torch. But in the following five events, each time The Torchbearer appeared at the entrance to the sports field, the high-pitched cry would go into the air and the children would start moving toward it like metal shavings being pulled toward a magnet. The idea of allowing large numbers of children to touch the torch was abandoned, and at subsequent events about 10 to 20 “outstanding students” were invited to stand at the front of the crowd. First they passed the reproduction torch down the line, and then they passed The Torch along. Finally the reproduction torch was used to “light” The Torch (neither was actually aflame, though the reproduction torch had red construction-paper flames coming from its top), and they exited the scene.

After a reading of Pierre de Coubertin’s Ode to Sport, Zhou conducted the activity called “We are all Torchbearers.” He asked, “Who is a Torchbearer?,” answering, “I am a Torchbearer! You are a Torchbearer! We are all Torchbearers!” Each child had been asked to bring a textbook and had been given a square of flame-red crepe paper. By rolling up the textbook and sticking the crepe paper into the top of the cone, each child had a little torch which she or he waved in the air. Zhou explained, “Take your knowledge and your strength and twist your book to make it into a torch, then put your torch into your heart.”

On our second night several members went to a school that had been cobbled together from students from several different schools and relocated into pre-fab buildings. Unfortunately I missed it – it turned out to be one of the most moving events of the trip. As they told me later, the curfew arrived and the electricity was cut off as they were in the midst of passing around The Torch. Zhou said to the students, “Are you afraid?” and they said, “Yes.” He said, “Don’t be afraid. Remember The Torch. The cinders are in your heart and will always be there, even when it is dark.” They concluded by signing autographs to the light of a flashlight, and then Zhou let them in shouting, “Go China! Go Sichuan! Go Deyang! Go School!” One of the children added, “I tell myself to go!” (我为我加油), which Zhou considered to be one of the most inspiring events of the trip, because it showed the child had taken the Olympic spirit inside himself, and made it his own.

At each stop, people wanted to touch The Torch, and the teachers and officials were more aggressive about it than the children. They wanted to take photos of themselves holding The Torch, or of groups of people each with one hand on The Torch. They seemed to feel, at least at some level, that touching the Lucky Clouds Torch would bring them good fortune. The undisputed star of our group was The Torch. After that, The Torchbearer. And after that, the International Person (me).

I also got mobbed for autographs and had to be rescued by a bodyguard.

I learned that in Chinese, a flame is a living thing with an anatomy like a plant. At its base are the “seeds of fire” (火种), or cinders, which represent hope, and are the thing that one holds in one’s inner heart. Out of the seeds come the “sprouts of fire” (火苗) or tendrils of flame. It grows into a full flame (火焰). It sends off “star fire” (星火), or sparks, which symbolize the passing of inspiration from one person to another. All of this was metaphorical – our torches did not have fires, because that would be too dangerous for children.

We organized Olympic re-enactments at two schools per day for three consecutive days, a total of six schools and over 3,000 children. Our status in Deyang increased each day. Local education officials held a meeting midway through our second day to assess our achievements. The head of the Deyang Education Bureau, Mr. Mao, observed, “The Olympic spirit is the spirit of conquering the disaster. Could we recover so quickly without the spirit of ‘swifter, higher, stronger’? This is also our spirit... Our students’ psychological wounds are serious. We will organize our students to get into motion. We humans cannot stop, our spirit cannot stop.” After three days and six schools, we were completely exhausted. At our farewell lunch, Section Chief Zeng observed that we had accomplished psychological intervention on a large scale. The standard psychological intervention reaches people one by one, so the experts who had been brought in could only reach about 1,000 people per week. We had reached over 3,000 students in three days. Zhou later explained, “Psychological intervention opens up a hole in your body and then sews it up again. It takes a long time to recover. We don’t open up a hole to do surgery. We let the sun shine on them and they absorb it into their bodies and keep it there. Chinese medicine is not in favor of doing operations, so this method is appealing.”

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When I first began studying anthropology, I took part in the famous seminar of Victor Turner, one of the most influential anthropologists of his time. He was then experimenting with ritual re-enactments, which we conducted in the seminar. He believed that ritual action and the handling of symbolic objects function to channel human emotions like a laser beam. He believed that rituals could have this affect on humans even when the rituals were not their own and our re-enactments tested his theory. He was also interested in the use of rituals in healing processes. Like many of his former students, I have carried on this tradition in my own teaching. Every year my theory class repeats the experiment by re-enacting a ritual of their choice. Without further belaboring the complicated theory behind this, I will just note that I regularly see and feel the transformative power of ritual re-enactments, which seem to be able to exert at least some effect on some people no matter how impromptu they may be. It was in this spirit that I entered into our Youth Olympic Games Re-enactment. Did we “solve the conflicts that could be solved”? Hard to say, but I do think that we made a small difference. For the theoretical background, see Turner’s *The Ritual Process*, *The Anthropology of Performance*, and *From Ritual to Theatre*.

In my classroom re-enactments, I am often surprised at the effect on myself, and in Deyang I experienced the sudden insights into my own culture that Turner says are a potential of ritual (a product of “liminality”). Against the background of the furor over the international torch relay, observing the reverence and emotion for The Torch and The Torchbearer made me suddenly see how cynical we are, more often than not, in the West, as a product of our secularized, rationalized society in which there are only small spaces in which it is acceptable to express reverence for symbols. A picture appeared in my mind which is an exaggeration but perhaps with a kernel of truth: In China, the majority of public expressions take place in a vast field of rituals and symbols, while the protest zones that were recently announced for the Olympic Games are the small, circumscribed spaces where critical analytical thought is expressed. In the US, the majority of public expressions take place in a vast field of critical analytical thought, while ritual expression takes place in small, circumscribed places like churches and, arguably, sports events. I realized that at least part of the anger that many Chinese people felt at the disruptions of the international torch relay was the result of the (to them) appalling and uncivilized lack of respect for a nearly-sacred object.

In the West the Olympic Games have struggled with a loss of idealism due to challenges like commercialism and doping. The Chinese Olympic organizers and many Chinese people held an idealistic faith in the transformative power of the Olympic Games, believing that they could facilitate China’s integration with the world and benefit its future development. The West duly regarded this with skepticism. According to Turner, a balanced social process requires rituals. The global village needs its ritual and the Olympic Games are currently serving that function. But also according to Turner, ritual has the potential to either increase solidarity or initiate irreparable schisms.

In Deyang it was possible to foresee the closing of this cultural gap between China and the West. Everyone agreed that our final performance at the elite Foreign Languages Middle School in Deyang was the “most orderly” – and all but myself and the artist Sun Yiyong considered this a good thing. The children did not mob The Torch or me. They spoke very good English and they paid 40,000 yuan per year in tuition. Apparently for such privileged children The Torch and The International Person had already lost some of their lustre.

星火相传（火炬手之歌）

星火相传在你我之间  
看和平友爱的接力多么壮观

**Pass on the Flame’s Spark (The Torchbearer’s Song)**

Pass the flame’s spark, from you on to me  
Grand relay of peace and fraternity

星火相传流动着激情  
愿和谐之旅永没有终点

神圣的火种被阳光点燃  
升腾起无比光荣的火焰  
全人类将记住这一瞬间  
五大洲让空天闪耀着五环

燃烧的火炬把星光点亮  
连接起无数圣洁的心愿  
全世界传递着同一梦想  
每个人都有精彩表现

作词作曲：孙义勇

演唱：单待 汤子星

2008青少年模拟奥运会会歌  
民间奥林匹克教育执行团队对  
歌 北京奥运会火炬手之歌

Pass the flame's spark, let passion flow on  
Its unending journey of harmony

Sacred fire's seeds, lit from the sun's rays  
In matchless glory, your flames leap up high  
All will remember this twinkling day  
Five lands below, five rings in the sky

Hot blazing torch will light up the stars  
Linking countless hearts' desires  
The whole world is passing on one dream  
All can see the great acts it inspires

Lyrics and melody: Sun Yiyong

English translation: Susan Brownell

Singer: solo Shang Zixing

Song for:

2008 Youth Olympic Games Re-enactment,  
People's Olympic Education Promotion Team  
Beijing Olympic Torchbearers

**Tags:** [The 2008 Beijing Olympics](#)