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AUTHOR: Jack Perkowski

Engaging China

With the 2008 Olympics fast approaching, governments, special interest groups and individuals alike are jockeying to use this pivotal event in China's history as leverage to promote their cause or point of view with the leaders in Beijing. The entire world will be watching how China reacts, and the next five months will provide the biggest test yet for the country's leadership. It also provides an opportunity for those with legitimate issues to learn how to engage China and use its growing economic and political muscle for the most good.

As a businessman who has lived and worked in China since 1994, I have seen what works and what doesn't work in this country, and cringe when I see well-meaning individuals supporting worthwhile causes ruin any chance they might have of success by making simple mistakes in dealing with China. As a growing world power, China has to become a true global citizen. At the same time, we all need to take into account and respect China's unique circumstances if we want to get anything done.

In the West, for example, calling media attention to an issue is often an effective way to force publicity conscious business and government officials to act. In China, government officials shun publicity, whether good or bad, and will quickly withdraw from discussions if a sensitive issue is discussed publicly. Likewise, staging public demonstrations and protests is an effective tool to draw attention to key issues in the U.S. In China, where the issue of maintaining order in a nation of 1.3 billion people with significant income disparities is a very real concern, it is likely to result in strong countermeasures. In dealing with Western businessmen and government officials, setting deadlines and issuing ultimatums may bring much needed focus. In China, these tactics seldom work. Walking away from the negotiating table is never a good tactic. It signals an end to discussion and negotiation.

In this context, I applauded Steven Spielberg's initial approach to calling China's attention to the humanitarian crisis in Darfur. He seemed to be going about it in just the right way. By agreeing to be an artistic adviser for the opening and closing ceremonies at the Olympics, he demonstrated his friendship towards China. His stature and the importance of the Games afforded him a unique position from which to press for change. According to Variety, Spielberg was "encouraged when China agreed to deploy a special envoy to Sudan and then

dropped its opposition to a U.N. Security Council resolution to send peacekeepers to stop the genocide.” Knowing the difficulties of getting access in China, I find it truly remarkable that a private citizen, with no governmental status, could have had such an impact. Clearly, Spielberg had gotten Beijing’s attention.

Unfortunately, progress on tough issues like Darfur is never as fast as any one of us would like. As I recount in my book, *Managing the Dragon*, every mistake I have made in building my business in China I made because I didn’t listen long and hard enough, and because I gave in to my American tendency to react too quickly. In China, patience is not only a virtue, it is a necessity. I have found it more productive to take a deep breath and go on when frustrated by slow progress on any front. Rather than continuing to work with China, Spielberg decided to withdraw as an artistic adviser to the Games, citing China’s lack of progress in resolving the Darfur crisis. In doing so, he gave up the unique ambassadorial status which had made him a powerful agent for change.

Like many Beijing residents, I was disappointed when I learned of Spielberg’s decision. There are many talented directors in the world, so the opening and closing ceremonies will no doubt be nothing short of spectacular. But, Spielberg has rare talents and is alone among his peers. His artistic input would have added that extra dimension that few others can provide.

More than its impact on the Olympic ceremonies, I was disappointed because Spielberg’s withdrawal brought an end to the special influence that he had seemed to gain with China’s leaders. Could he have succeeded in bringing about meaningful results if he had persisted? We’ll never know.

In a world as complex as ours, there will continue to be issues where China’s growing economic and political clout can help bring about positive change. In the past, the United States was the only country powerful enough to have such an impact. In this evolving new world order, China is rapidly becoming another. If we want to use China’s new found power to achieve the most good, we need to meet China half way and learn how best to engage the country in constructive dialogue and action.