

A feisty debate has erupted in a teahouse tucked away in a hutong close to Lama Temple. A group of sharp arguers meet every week for two hours of healthy verbal aggression about the matters that make the world spin. A late cup of tea is enough to fire up catchy discussions like "should developing countries invest in sex tourism?" and "should WikiLeaks be shut down?" Inspired in the British parliamentary style, the goal of The Beijing Debate Society (BDS) is to refine and revel on the art of debate with balance and persuasion.

There's a sense of arriving at a secret society when you finally reach the red lantern lit tea parlor after half an hour of misdirection around Runqiyuan Teahouse. Down the narrow hallway, debaters gather among pots, boxes and tea steam. The session opens: "This house believes that zoos should be banned." The clock starts ticking and parties have a mere 15 minutes to prepare their arguments and imagine how to voice them.

**Mighty word**

"Ladies and gentlemen, would you like to live in a cage?" asked the proposition bringing up animal cruelty and the bad condition of the Beijing zoo to the forum. "Animals lose their dignity and personality when taken away from their natural habitat to live in captivity. Natural reserves, safaris and the Discovery Channel are the solutions." Opposition reacted: "Will you forbid driving because of a bad driver? No! We say put an end to bad zoos, and keep the good zoos running. Zoos help the preservation of species, provide for a democratic and pragmatic education and ultimately promote a love of nature." Unhappy dolphins versus rescued tigers; spiteful amusement against family fun; loss of humanity against citizenship were some of the finer points under scrutiny.

"You really need to think on your feet," said Carles Dirrig, 25, creator of the society. "You have only 15 minutes to think through all sides of an issue and pre-

pare the arguments, and when confronted with questions, you have one second to structure and clarify your ideas very quickly," he added.

Topics are chosen on the spot and everyone can propose one as long as it is not a personal discussion. The Beijing house discussed on the following: "Should the man go back to the moon?"; "should speeding tickets be proportional to the driver's wealth?"; "should we ban men from being heads of state for the next 20 years?" "We stay away from religion, politics and over debated topics like climate change. We're not discussing our own ideas or on something we know won't get a resolution, we're debating for the sake of debating," Dirrig said. Without time for a Google or Wikipedia peek, it's harder than it seems because "you have to create sentences on the fly based on your knowledge and ability to react. Structure is the golden rule."

Dirrig explains the drill: "There are always two sides,

people for [the proposition] and people against the motion [the opposition]. On both sides people group up in two teams, so you end up having four teams of two and everybody competes against everybody else." Even if the motion is upheld, opposition can win if it is the team with the best argumentation line. "That's the single biggest difference there is between British parliamentary and other styles of debate," told Dirrig. Team positions are randomly assigned and each person has five minutes to speak. Opponents can interfere with direct questions and destabilize the speaker.

**Speak up**

"The BDS is a not-for-profit, non-religious, non-political and non-discriminatory society which is open to all who wish to improve their argument-building skills," the society states online. Debaters are a squad of about 15 people from different walks of life and nationalities. They describe themselves as "Interested

and intelligent people, who read the news and like to be aware of the world."

Dialogue runs in English but is not focused on enunciation, rather on the ideas that are presented. "The most challenging debate for me was when I had to propose that this house would invest in sex tourism in underdeveloped countries," said Solvig Topping, 28, from the UK. "As a woman it was difficult to stand up for it putting aside my personal opinion, because I had to debate based on the merits of the arguments. It was quite interesting."

Naturally argumentative with colleagues and taxi drivers, Topping recalls: "I was a bit of a disaster in the beginning." The round-table sessions helped her brush up her public speaking abilities: "Debates make me think about what I want to say and structure my speech as opposed to blurting it all out." There are other advantages: "Being able to organize your speech around key points is even helpful to write

an email or to think twice before engaging in an argument."

After nearly a year in China, the English editor has been debating since May. "I was fairly new in town and I wanted to go out, meet people and see more of Beijing. I speak Chinese most of the time and I really felt like having an argument in English," she said. Topping found out about the society in one of the local lifestyle magazines online and recommends the "good atmosphere and fun."

Kurt Sun, 33, originally from China, pointed out the "language barrier can be an issue for non-native English speakers, but it's not a fatal problem." Sun said: "Vocabulary wise, it's particularly difficult to address topics which I'm not very familiar with. On the other hand, I always learn a lot of new words from each debate and I can certainly improve my English." A caterer, who studied in Germany for a while, Sun explained that "most of all, debating is a good exercise in my native language. The strategy and logi-

cal reasoning helps me construct my own opinions and be more persuasive in daily life."

**Confidence**

"Debating helps build confidence, it's not only a career skill but also fundamental for human interaction," Dirrig stated. "The biggest advantage is being able to disagree with people, clearly stating why and with a rational decision," he added. Each discussion ends with a rebuttal from each team, after which a judge decides which team is more effective. There are no prizes and everyone wins once in a while.

At the end of the debate, the judge, usually Dirrig, gives feedback to all the speakers, who also comment about the other speakers. "It's really about being able to communicate better while having fun," said Dirrig. "Half the time people aren't listening to what you say and the inability to convey your ideas clearly can be very frustrating," he added.

Dirrig, half-French, half-British, created the debate society in

April. "I did debating when I was in France at school and inadvertently started talking about it with other people and realized there were no debating activities in Chaoyang area," he recalled. Since then, the Beijing society ruled on about 20 motions and has been welcoming new people every session. Unlike in Europe, where there are plenty competitions and semi-pro debaters speaking up, the society ignores debating tournaments going on in Beijing.

The society remember Greek philosophers and the wise men advocating reason in the 18th century, planted the debating seed and its good practice. Later on Winston Churchill was a fine confuter and most US presidents are good public speakers.

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The ultimate exercise

By Gareth George

Any old powerlifter will tell you what the best exercise of all is: the back squat. Putting a barbell across your back and squatting to parallel activates, according to most scientific estimates, approximately 75 percent of the muscles in your body. Sure, you'll feel it in your thighs, but your shoulders must be pinned back and locked tight too, and it forces your core to stabilize the weight through the lift. As the king of compound exercises, it sends signals to the brain to start producing testosterone and human growth hormone like no other single move. These chemicals are the building blocks of muscle, and many people are amazed when they first start squatting heavy; it's not unusual for a lifter to put on 15 kilos of lean muscle after introducing heavy squats to your workout twice a week for six months. The squat, as simple an exercise as is imaginable, reigns supreme. Or does it?

Some argue that the Olympic lifts – (discussed last week) the clean and jerk and the snatch are even better – and there are studies which suggest that the force the body must exert to complete them make these exercises even better.

Before training became uniform all over the world, with most elite lifters following similar training programs, lifters used to argue about the exercises that had worked for them. Some of the best people to ask are throwers (discuss, hammer and javelin specialists) as the blend of raw power and technique in their disciplines has meant that historically, elite athletes were getting top scores with markedly different training programs. I've heard from some who swear by a powerlifting routine for strength along with bodyweight plyometrics to compliment the throwing action. Others follow a routine barely different to an Olympic lifter. But one exercise that was said to be a mainstay of the top throwers of the late 1960s onwards, is the overhead squat. Rugby and American football players now incorporate the lift into their training, and it's also very popular with rock and ice climbers.

Essentially the overhead squat works like a back squat, but forces you to have great balance and coordination too. In fact, no exercise will show up (and strengthen) the weaknesses in your core and posterior chain like the overhead squat. It's an incredibly unforgiving exercise: You simply can't cheat with a weight you're holding over your head.

The old throwers claim the overhead squat forces your muscles to work as one unit – thus translating the power from the hips better to the arms. And what athlete couldn't benefit from that? As for whether it's the ultimate exercise, that's hard to say. But it certainly gets results. Some elite athletes have even incorporated the overhead squat into a hybrid exercise which is certainly a killer: A full snatch followed by an overhead squat counts as one rep. For now, the maneuver is known only as "The Exercise." If you've ever tried it, you'll find the name appropriate.

**How to overhead squat:**

Start light, using a grip slightly wider than your shoulders, as the best way to get the bar overhead is to snatch it (see last week's column).

When the bar is overhead, tighten your shoulder blades so the bar is in line with your posterior chain. It should feel like you're trying to pull the bar in half.

Take a deep breath then begin to squat slowly with your feet at about a 45-degree angle. Don't allow your legs to buckle inward.

Get someone to show you at your gym initially.

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► Vera Penêda finds words – and adrenaline – flowing in a verbal war



Taking debate



"Milk is for colonialists, man!" Members of the Beijing Debate Society debating in a teahouse. Inset: members of BDS. Photos: Vera Penêda and courtesy of BDS