

MANUFACTURING MODERNITY: THE 2008 BEIJING OLYMPIC OPENING CEREMONY
AND CHINA'S REBRANDING

by

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Presented to the
Committee on Degrees in History and Literature
and the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Honors

Harvard College
Cambridge, Massachusetts

March 3, 2025

Word Count: 16,218

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INTRODUCTION: White Ash

Everyone seems to have something to say about the 2008 Olympics. Most people I talk to still remember it. This summer, after the 2024 Paris Games, disgruntled viewers flocked to the comments section of the YouTube video for the 2008 Opening Ceremony.

“I came back here to see what a REAL olympic opening ceremony looks like”

“The only country who respects the spirit of olympic games, thank you Chinese brothers from Greece. Our countries have a long history, that's why we respect each other!”

“Leaving a comment to remind everyone that THIS IS WHAT THE REAL ceremony should look like. No country ever beats Beijing 2008 yet!!”¹

I do not personally recall the 2008 Games in much detail, but I remember my parents huddled around the dim, curved screen of our living room CRT television, enthusiastically rooting for their home countries. I remember my mother’s delight — and my father’s disappointment — when I picked a side and started chanting: “China! China! China!”

But the China we rooted for in 2008 was no longer the China that my mother had known. Economic reforms under Chairman Deng Xiaoping had set the country on a rapid trajectory of modernization. China became noticeably more engaged in global trade, attracting investors and companies seeking to lower manufacturing costs. By 2008, it was known as the “world’s factory.”² Just 32 years after his death, Mao Zedong’s China had receded and was replaced by a new economic system that scholar Erin Huang refers to as “neoliberal post-socialism.”³ As anthropologist Jennifer Hubbert observes, the 2008 Games signaled a tectonic shift in the global

¹ @kirole7381, @zarok1757, @jrenspace Comments on “Full Opening Ceremony from Beijing 2008,” posted by “Olympics,” YouTube video, 4:18:00, August 8, 2019.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bufV3EgyPGU&t=764s>

² Kevin Honglin Zhang, *China as the World Factory* (Routledge, 2006), 1.

³ Erin Huang, *Urban Horror: Neoliberal Post-Socialism and the Limits of Visibility* (Duke University Press, 2020), 2.

financial order and played a crucial role in shaping modern Chinese identity.⁴ For many Chinese citizens, the Olympics heralded the long-awaited arrival of national prosperity. Hubbert's interviews with Chinese youth illustrate how the Opening Ceremony served as a platform for Chinese audiences to compare western⁵ economic development models to China's own.⁶ Given the high stakes, the organizing committee tasked Zhang Yimou, China's most renowned living director, with directing the Opening Ceremony. Zhang⁷ had only a matter of hours to redefine how the world perceived China.

He succeeded remarkably. The ceremony prompted western nationals to seriously consider the emergence of a China that was a stronger, richer, and more powerful competitor than they had imagined. In his review of the ceremony, film critic Robert Ebert confronted his earlier impressions of China as “countless little people with chopsticks and pigtails. Yao Ming wouldn’t have fit into my picture. China in those days had a pathetic economy... Today, from a standing start, China has the world’s third-largest economy. We are first, but sinking. They’re rising.”⁸

⁴ Jennifer Hubbert, “Of Menace and Mimicry: The 2008 Beijing Olympics,” *Modern China* 39, no. 4 (2013): 421.

⁵ There are arguments for keeping the “w” in “western” lowercase, which I will do throughout this paper. Here is the reasoning that a contributor to The Chicago Manual of Style online blog provides: “When making reference to western (occidental) cultures, western media, western identity politics, I prefer to use a lowercase *w* to de-emphasize the unity of the West (even though it is often convenient in argument to point to it as such) and because capitalization of *w* would further privilege the West.” Chicago Manual of Style Online, “Capitalization,” last modified August 20, 2013, <https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/qanda/data/faq/topics/Capitalization/faq0034.html>; however, I will continue to refer to developed countries in western Europe and the United States as the “west,” despite the controversial, contrived, and imprecise nature of the term because it serves as a helpful shorthand and also gestures to the significant power that the west holds in the Chinese cultural imaginary, as well as the geopolitical dominance of “western” actors.

⁶ Hubbert, “Of Menace and Mimicry,” 1.

⁷ A note on Chinese names: in Chinese, the surname comes before the given name. All citations in the bibliography will still follow the English convention with last name, first name. When someone’s name appears in text, it will be written to follow the Chinese convention — the last name will always precede the first name.

⁸ Roger Ebert, “Zhang Yimou’s gold medal,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, August 9, 2008. http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2008/08/zhang_yimous_gold_medal.html

Academic and journalistic analyses often engage with the 2008 Opening Ceremony to the extent that it affirmed the authority of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP): Sinologist Florian Schneider understands the ceremony as a performance of national solidarity that reinforced the legitimacy of CCP rule, drawing comparisons to bloody Roman munera.⁹ Similarly, Hong Kong-based scholar Xu Guoqi likens the Opening Ceremony to the 1936 Berlin Olympics, underscoring its function in projecting state power.¹⁰ However, such comparisons overlook the ceremony's unique visual language. The layered references embedded in the ceremony's choreography were far more complex than many sinologists give credit for. My primary methodology throughout this thesis is grounded in my readings of the ceremony's symbolic imagery, extrapolating from each key symbol the historical, cultural, and political context it gestured to. While many academics are interested in using the ceremony to cast projections about China's future and determine the merit of the country's path to it, I am neither interested in speculating nor making value judgments.

Rather, I will examine how the Opening Ceremony represented China's understanding of itself. It functioned as a choreographed vision of the Chinese nation by planting China's modern economic strength within a manufactured historical narrative, couched in socialist aesthetics familiar to its populace. By staging a mass spectacle adorned with cultural symbols drawn from China's early history, the ceremony positioned the CCP as both the inheritor of a millennia-old civilization and the architect of China's modern resurgence. The ceremony was a manifesto of China's national identity in the 21st century that expressed its complex negotiation between neoliberal capitalism and state socialism. Beijing's spectacle did not merely showcase national

⁹ Florian Schneider, *Staging China: The Politics of Mass Spectacle* (Leiden University Press, 2019), 20.

¹⁰ Xu Guoqi, *Olympic Dreams: China and Sports: 1895–2008* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 227.

pride or authoritarian control; it actively redefined the Chinese nation as a unified whole. Past, present, and future were seamlessly aligned with the state's geopolitical aspirations.

If the ceremony provoked apprehension abroad, it may well signify China's success in asserting geopolitical dominance. However, western fixations on the ceremony's perceived militarism distracted from the ceremony's capitalist messaging. This oversight is significant because it was not China's military but China's turn toward (state-controlled) capitalism that laid the foundations for its rise. The power of the spectacle, as Guy Debord first theorized in *Society of the Spectacle*, lies in its ability to naturalize modern capitalist values.¹¹ Decades before Debord, Frankfurt theorist Siegfried Kracauer examined how capitalist industrial production was embedded in the visual aesthetics of mass coordination in his 1927 essay on modernity and capitalism, "The Mass Ornament."¹² As I will explain in Chapter One, the Opening Ceremony's choreographed displays brought to life the aesthetics of mass ornamentation that Kracauer first described a century ago. His framework interprets mass spectacles as representations of economic power, demonstrating technological sophistication through the animation of large groups of people. In this way, the Opening Ceremony symbolically showcased China's proud new role as a country of mass production. By also borrowing from the aesthetic of Maoist mass spectacles, the ceremony rehearsed what Huang calls the illusory coexistence between socialism and neoliberalism.¹³ The ensconcing of neoliberal capitalism within socialist aesthetics is central to Beijing's use of Kracauer's mass ornament in the 2008 Opening Ceremony.

The glorification of industrial production, however, is not exclusive to capitalism. Since he founded the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Mao directed the country's

¹¹ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Zone Books, 1995), 36.

¹² Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 77–79.

¹³ Huang, *Urban Horror*, 2.

industrialization to “catch up” with the western nations that once exploited it.¹⁴ As scholar Geremie Barmé notes, the Opening Ceremony elided reference to Maoism, though it wove China’s industrial development into other parts of China’s historical narrative by foregrounding ancient technological achievements, which were thematically structured around the canonical “four great inventions” of antiquity: gunpowder, papermaking, movable type, and the compass.¹⁵ This framing situated China’s economic position in 2008 within a broader historical continuum, rationalizing the CCP’s trajectory toward global superpower status.

If, as Kracauer argues, the mass ornament aestheticizes the mechanisms of its own production, then the Beijing Opening Ceremony offered a spectacular illusion of unity — one that, beneath its carefully choreographed surface, reflected the tensions and ambitions of China’s 21st-century transformation. Chapter Two will examine how the ceremony invoked an imagined past, selectively drawing from Confucian values as well as ancient technologies to craft a historical narrative that legitimizes China’s present while enhancing its soft power. Historians Orville Schell and John Delury diagnose a recent shift in how Chinese politicians engage with tradition: Although Mao’s government rejected Chinese traditional culture, the CCP now assimilates it into state rhetoric in its pursuit of “wealth and power.”¹⁶ Hubbert argues that the Opening Ceremony leveraged invocations of tradition to set itself apart from the west, employing “essentialized tropes of Chinese culture.”¹⁷

However, these tropes align more with state rhetoric than with historical accuracy. Political scientist Linus Hagström states that China’s soft power strategy relies not only on cultural symbolism but on appeals to a state-sanctioned, simplified version of Confucianism —

¹⁴ Odd Arne Westad and Jian Chen, *The Great Transformation: China's Road from Revolution to Reform* (Yale University Press, 2024): 186.

¹⁵ Geremie R. Barmé, “China’s Flat Earth: History and 8 August 2008,” *The China Quarterly* 197 (2009). <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741009000046>

¹⁶ Orville Schell and John Delury, *Wealth and Power: China's Long March to the Twenty-first Century*, 5.

¹⁷ Hubbert, “Of Menace and Mimicry,” 427.

particularly the Confucian value of “harmony,” which was the central theme of the 2008 Opening Ceremony.¹⁸ As Schneider writes, “the conceptual frameworks of Confucian thought provide contemporaries with resources for their own political agendas,” and the CCP has utilized its interpretation of Confucianism to defend its modern nationalist program.¹⁹ John Delury further contends that in the lead-up to the Games, “harmony” was weaponized in state policies targeting Tibetans and Uyghurs.²⁰ Economist Andrew Martin Fischer states that Tibetan protests against ethnic erasure were exacerbated by widening economic disparities between Han developers and Tibetans.²¹ Pankaj Mishra confirms that “harmony” is a watchword for subservience to the state as it undertakes its project of rapid modernization, which victimized Han Chinese as well as Tibetans.²²

The 2008 Opening Ceremony also opened a window into China’s projected trajectory, capturing its aspirations at a pivotal historical moment. My conclusion will examine the discourse surrounding China’s future and examine how both western discourse on China’s growth and China’s own approach to modernization have been shaped by colonial frameworks.

Barmé, Schell, Delury, and Xu seem to suggest that China should aspire to emulate western governments. However, it was China’s engagement with western economic models that catalyzed its current conditions. To quote the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, “Rather than an oriental-despotic distortion of capitalism, China should be seen today as a repetition of the development of capitalism in Europe... China developed quickly, not despite authoritarian

¹⁸ Linus Hagström, “Harmony and the Quest for Soft Power,” *International Studies Review* 22 (2020), 508.

¹⁹ Schneider, *Staging China*, 178.

²⁰ John Delury, “‘Harmonious’ in China.” *Policy Review* (Washington, D.C.), no. 148. <http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/magazines/harmonious-china/docview/216434587/se-2?accountid=11311>

²¹ Andrew Martin Fischer, *The Disempowered Development of Tibet in China: A Study in the Economics of Marginalization* (Lexington Books, 2014), 11.

²² Pankaj Mishra, “At War with the Utopia of Modernity” in *China in 2008: A Year of Great Significance*, ed. Merkel-Hess, et al. (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 41.

communist rule but because of it.”²³ China’s marketization and labor exploitation are responses to the demands of western countries, which often determine the path to financial success in the 21st century. There is no shortage of criticisms to make about the Chinese government. However, part of my project is to illustrate that critiques of China should not be directed by neo-Cold War rhetoric. Instead, they should address the ways that many of the problems with Chinese governance stem from its assimilation of the guiding principles that direct “liberal”²⁴ western nations.

Paradoxically, this rhetoric may have reinforced the lasting impact of the 2008 Games. More than 16 years later, memories of the Opening Ceremony still endure. These memories are preserved in op-eds, academic literature, and even in unexpected, everyday encounters. As it happens, I came to this topic by chance. During the summer of 2024, I went to the M+ Museum in Hong Kong to see an exhibit by an artist who I thought I would like to write my thesis about. A kind elderly docent had been following me around, giving me the spiel on the artworks he liked. “Ah, Cao Fei,” he remarked when I arrived at my desired exhibit. “Did you know that she made this after the 2008 Olympics?” He launched into a story about how he visited Beijing around that time, about a year before the Games began. “Bulldozers were everywhere, and old buildings were being razed and replaced with newer ones that were more modern and would be more appealing to international visitors. I spent the whole day walking around the city, and by

²³ Slavoj Žižek, “Three Notes on China: Past and Present,” *positions: east asia cultures critique* 19, no. 3 (2011): 716.

²⁴ I put “liberal” in quotations to acknowledge the multiple meanings of the word and the complicated history of liberal humanism. In *The Robotic Imaginary: The Human and the Price of Dehumanized Labor*, Jennifer Rhee refers to the histories of dehumanized labor — including Chinese coolie labor — that gave rise to the conception of liberal humanism in the west. In *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, Lisa Lowe discusses how it was only through the exploitation of labor — particularly through colonialism and slavery — that the west could boast an economy that supported liberal culture, as we define it. This is distinct from “liberal,” as defined by the Freedom House and other civil rights organizations that rate “people’s access to political rights and civil liberties” and individual freedoms. Jennifer Rhee, *The Robotic Imaginary the Human and the Price of Dehumanized Labor* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 4; Lisa Lowe, *Intimacies of the Four Continents*, (Duke University Press, 2015), 2; Freedom House, “China: Country Profile”: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/china>

the end of the day, my shoes were covered in white ash. Everything in the city was. It was all white.” Then he smiled, thanked me for my time, and left.

CHAPTER ONE: ‘Mathematical Majesty’

Beijing’s Bid

On July 13, 2001, Beijing won the bid to host the Summer Olympics for 2008.²⁵ It would be the first time China was to host the Games and a perfect opportunity for the country to show the world how rapidly it had grown in the past few decades. In a survey taken that year, 79 percent of Chinese respondents and about 90 percent of Beijing residents said that the coming Games were important to them personally.²⁶ According to *China Daily*, a newspaper owned by the Publicity Department of the Chinese Communist Party, 31,000 parents named their children *Aoyun* (奥运), the Mandarin translation for “Olympic Games,” and *Shen’ao* (申奥), the translation for “bid for the Olympics,” between 2001 and 2008.²⁷

Preparations began in earnest over the next seven years. Xi Jinping, who was rapidly rising through the ranks of the CCP, chaired a governing committee overseeing the arrangements for the Games.²⁸ Olympics organizers invested heavily in environmental clean-up efforts and ordered the construction of 31 venues, railroads, and airports.²⁹ The Beijing Olympic committee selected Zhang Yimou, one of China’s most acclaimed film directors, to be Chief Director of the Olympic ceremonies.³⁰ Zhang had a budget of USD 300 million — far greater than the budget of

²⁵ Jere Longman, “Beijing Winds Bid for 2008 Olympic Games,” *The New York Times*, July 14, 2001. <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/14/sports/olympics-beijing-wins-bid-for-2008-olympic-games.html>

²⁶ Tom Rosentiel, “An Enthusiastic China Welcomes the Olympics,” *Pew Research Center*, August 5, 2008. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2008/08/05/an-enthusiastic-china-welcomes-the-olympics/>

²⁷ “China’s History is Spelled out in Baby Names,” *China Daily*, June 24, 2014. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/2014-06/24/content_17613691.htm

²⁸ “China Forms Top-Level Leading Group for Olympics Preparations,” *Consulate General for the People’s Republic of China in New York*, March 12, 2008. http://newyork.china-consulate.gov.cn/eng/xw/200803/t20080312_4686826.htm

²⁹ Geoffrey A. Fowler and Stacy Meichtry, “China Counts the Cost of Hosting the Olympics,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 16, 2008; Xuefei Ren, “Airpocalypse in Beijing and Delhi,” in *Governing the Urban in China and India* (Princeton University Press), 94.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB121614671139755287> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB121614671139755287>

³⁰ Zhang was the director of the Opening and Closing Ceremonies, though for this paper, I will only be referring to his Opening Ceremony.

any film he had made — to make the grandest Opening Ceremony the world had ever seen.³¹

After around 16,000 performers were selected, rehearsals began in 2007 in the southern suburbs of Beijing.³² “I believe on August 8th, you’ll perform even better, surprising the world and making the Chinese people proud,” Zhang told his troupe of thousands gathered for ceremony rehearsals, sweat dripping from his temples as he stood on a stage overlooking the crowd.³³

These rehearsals were a secret well kept, conducted in a secure Olympics compound.³⁴

Beijing’s meticulous preparation paid off. In the years that followed, the Opening Ceremony was remembered as a feat of unprecedented scale and coordination. It showcased a new, modern China and is often referred to as the country’s “coming-out” ceremony, symbolizing its emergence as a global superpower.³⁵ Guy Debord claims that the spectacle visualizes the value system of its producers; it “is a worldview that has actually been materialized.”³⁶ China’s “coming out” was shaped by its embrace of global capitalism, which was celebrated by the 2008 Opening Ceremony. In the following chapter, I will explore how China’s capitalist turn entailed its metamorphosis into the world’s factory, becoming a locus of cheap goods, materials, and labor. The 2008 Opening Ceremony aestheticized this metamorphosis, grounding it in the socialist aesthetic tradition of Maoist mass spectacles. As Erin Huang contends, this ideological

³¹ Osgood, “What Everyone Got Wrong About the Last Beijing Olympics’ Opening Ceremony.”

³² Gu Jun (director), *The Everlasting Flame*, International Olympic Committee, 2009. 1 hr., 40 min (18:00); “Preparation for the Games: New Beijing Great Olympics: Official Report of the Beijing 2008 Olympics Games (Volume III),” BOCOG Media & Communications Department, May 2010.

<https://stillmed.olympic.org/Documents/Reports/Official%20Past%20Games%20Reports/Summer/ENG/2008-RO-S-Beijing-vol3.pdf>

³³ Gu, *The Everlasting Flame*; BOCOG, “Preparation for the Games”

³⁴ David Barboza, “Gritty Renegade Now Directs China’s Close-Up,” *The New York Times*, August 7, 2008. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/08/sports/olympics/08guru.html>

³⁵ Joe McDonald, “President Xi Jinping, China’s ‘chairman of everything,’ ” *AP News*, February 3, 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/winter-olympics-china-president-xi-jinping-b5aeed14e662e72570df15076290830>

³⁶ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 7.

hybridization has tangible effects: “The imaginary coexistence of socialism and capitalism rehearses a futurity... that is actively reshaping the lived conditions of the present.”³⁷

The Opening Ceremony is often remembered by western scholars and journalists as a symbolic illustration of China’s authoritarianism. Film critic Robert Ebert, for example, compared the ceremony to Leni Riefenstahl’s infamous Nazi propaganda film, *Triumph of the Will*.³⁸ But such a reading misunderstands the kind of power that the ceremony projected. As my close reading will demonstrate, the 2008 Opening Ceremony was not a deliberate demonstration of military authority, but rather a show of mastery over the new global economic system as the “world’s manufacturing center.”³⁹ As Debord notes, although spectacles can “[buttress] state power,” the spectacle more often “characterizes bureaucratic capitalism.”⁴⁰ Zhang’s Opening Ceremony affirms the principles of capitalist production through mass choreography, which Siegfried Kracauer understands as an aestheticization of the machinelike routine of mass production.

Of course, China’s economic transformation unfolded in a post-Fordist era, one far removed from Kracauer’s own.⁴¹ Still, viewing the Opening Ceremony through his critique of the “mass ornament” reveals how it reinforces both capitalist logic and state power within China’s unique model of state-controlled capitalism.

³⁷ Huang, *Urban Horror*, 2.

³⁸ Ebert, “Zhang Yimou’s gold medal.”

³⁹ James Fallows, “China Makes, the World Takes,” *The Atlantic*, July 2007.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/07/china-makes-the-world-takes/305987/>

⁴⁰ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 36.

⁴¹ Social scientists typically identify post-Fordist production by a reliance on information technology and the global economy. However, the use of this term is still debated. See: Bob Jessop, “Fordism,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed March 2, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/money/Fordism>.

Let The Games Begin

The Opening Ceremony kicked off at 8:08 p.m. on the eighth day of the eighth month of 2008.⁴² This was deliberate: Eight is lucky in Chinese numerology, and the Games were planned to the second.⁴³ The video broadcast of the ceremony captured the countdown for the Games, signaled by a screen-projected animation of a Chinese sundial, invoking Beijing's splashy sundial-shaped monument that was constructed for its millennium celebrations eight years earlier.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, a series of short-range fireworks circled the arena like shooting stars. On the field, a low rumbling noise played as square lights started turning on in quick succession. The camera moved in to show that these were not decorative lights, but rather 2,008 drums fitted with LED strips. The rumbling noise, likened to "rolling spring thunder"⁴⁵ was, in fact, a drumroll. Then, the lights went dark, and the drummers stood motionless, poised for their next fit of buzz rolling. The crowd roared as the drums, each now a node of a giant timer, lit up to form numbers counting down to the start of the Games. It was as if the event were a magical one, ordained by the heavens and aligned with the firework-simulated stars. The audience watched in anticipation, as though witnessing the fulfillment of cosmic fate.

⁴² There was a competition among some parents to see who could give birth to a child at that exact time. One expectant father told *China Daily*, "If my wife is lucky enough to deliver an 'Olympic baby,' the luck means something more than family joy." Addie Chan, "Race to have an 'Olympic baby,'" *China Daily*, October 12, 2007. https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-10/12/content_6170207.htm

⁴³ Jeffrey Wasserstrom, "Dreams and Nightmares," in Dayan, Daniel, and Monroe Price. *Owning the Olympics: Narratives of the New China*, 2008. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/book.6372>

⁴⁴ "China: Monument to celebrate 5000 years of civilisation." *AP Archive*, video, 2:01. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1Fz7kWPbko>

⁴⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, "Multimedia gallery." <https://www.defense.gov/Multimedia/Photos/igphoto/2001150071/>



Figure 1: The countdown for the Games. Each node of light is one drum. “Full Opening Ceremony from Beijing 2008,” posted by “Olympics,” YouTube video, 4:18:00, August 8, 2019.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bufV3EgyPGU&t=1925s>



Figure 2: The firework display for the Opening Ceremony, representing the invention of gunpowder. Olympics.



Figure 3: Drum rehearsal. Gu Jun (Director), *The Everlasting Flame*, International Olympic Committee, 2009. 1 hour 41 minutes.

<https://olympics.com/en/original-series/episode/beijing-2008-official-film-the-everlasting-flame>



Figure 4: The drumming routine. Olympics.

The Games were marketed as just this. Government officials framed the 2008 Olympics as the fulfillment of a century-old wish — one that Geremie Barmé notes was “powerfully attractive to both Chinese and international media outlets.”⁴⁶ In his book *Staging China: The*

⁴⁶ Barmé, “China’s Flat Earth: History and 8 August 2008.”

Politics of Mass Spectacle, Florian Schneider writes that “Official slogans about China’s ‘hundred-year-old Olympic Dream’ resonated with many Chinese citizens, especially since such phrases evoked images of an earlier China that had violently and disruptively modernised amidst wars and foreign colonial interventions.”⁴⁷ This rhetoric casts China’s modernization as an ordained destiny — one that, at last, was unfolding without bloodshed. This destiny aligned with the CCP’s grand historical narrative: Imperial China, once East Asia’s economic and cultural center, was among the wealthiest kingdoms in the world. Government officials characterized China’s rapid growth as a return to the natural order.⁴⁸ After enduring the so-called “Century of Humiliation” at the hands of western colonial powers, war with Japan and the Kuomintang, and decades of upheaval under Mao, China was finally a host for the Games, “an event that epitomised modern internationalism,” Schneider writes.⁴⁹ And what a stage it was. The 2008 Games attracted the largest television audience in Olympic history, with 3.6 billion viewers — about 53 percent of the world’s population — watching at least one minute of coverage.⁵⁰ After the end of the countdown, Chairman Hu Jintao stood before his immense international crowd, the first Chinese politician to have the privilege of initiating the Opening Ceremony. Beside him, International Olympics Committee president Jacques Rogge watched stone-faced as Hu smiled and waved.

⁴⁷ Schneider, *Staging China*, 20.

⁴⁸ This grand narrative is also a way the CCP legitimizes its one-party rule: “The CCP crafted a narrative around the Century of Humiliation that legitimized its authority, portraying itself as the only party able to withstand foreign intervention and alleviate the Chinese suffering caused by outside aggressors. According to this national narrative, the CCP was the only government that could return China to its former glory and rectify the losses experienced by China, justifying the one-party system.” Jordan Lac, “The Century of Humiliation and the Century After,” *Brown Political Review*, January 26, 2024.

⁴⁹ Schneider, *Staging China*, 20.

⁵⁰ IOC, “Games of the XXIX Olympiad, Beijing 2008 Global Television and Online Media Report,” September 2009. <https://stillmed.olympics.com/media/Document%20Library/OlympicOrg/Games/Summer-Games/Games-Beijing-2008-Olympic-Games/IOC-Marketing-and-Broadcasting-Various-files/Global-Television-and-Online-Media-Report-Beijing-2008.pdf>

The drummers began their act. They opened their arms to the sky, vocalizing in harmony. They wore long silver robes accented with red, an auspicious color in Chinese tradition, their foreheads marked with a red stripe. Their drums were modeled after the ancient bronze *fou* (缶) drum. In perfect synchronization, they turned their heads and bent forward, striking the drumhead with the palms of their hands. Then, they turned the other way, called out once more, and struck the drum with the opposite hand. The rhythm pumped through the stadium like a beating heart — not just from the drumming itself but from the synchronized movement and breath that animated it. The drummers moved their bodies in synchrony with their breath. As they bent down and leaned forward, they raised their eyes to the sky in supplication with unwavering smiles. The drummers were more than musicians; they were the instruments. And drumming was only part of their dance — they brushed their hands across their drums, caressing them before miming the motions of swimming, their heads tilting as if coming up for air. As they hit their drums with increasing force, the camera angle widened, revealing the full scale of the performance.

Indeed, the most impressive part of this act is not the music nor the ability of any individual drummer: it is the sheer number of people involved in the production. The drummers chanted in unison, repeating the Confucian proverb, “Is it not a joy to meet friends who come from afar?” before they drew glowing red drumsticks and swept them across the drums in a cleaning motion. The lights went out. The drumsticks glowed like marching footprints. Suddenly, 29 footprint-shaped fireworks ignited in quick succession across the Beijing skyline, each one marking an Olympiad, creating the trail of a giant invisible ghost. Only five minutes had passed since the start of the countdown.



Figure 5: The ceremony’s firework footprints. Olympics.

Martial Arts

This impressive start set the tone for the remaining four hours of the ceremony, which featured dozens more fireworks and thousands of performers. It was seductively maximalist in both form and scale. Live NBC commentators deemed the performance “awe-inspiring and perhaps a little intimidating.”⁵¹ Many observers framed the performance in militaristic terms. The drummers, after all, were not professional performers but soldiers from the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). For the ceremony, they swapped their fatigues for elaborate robes — more futuristic monk than military recruit.⁵² Sourcing drummers from the PLA was likely a pragmatic move: already disciplined in drill exercises, soldiers required less training and no additional pay.

Yet, few spectators knew of or remarked on the PLA affiliation. Instead, perceptions of militarism stemmed from broader skepticism of the Chinese state. In his book *Olympic Dreams*, published before the Games, Xu Guoqi warned: “The PRC, which has been obsessed with

⁵¹ Hubbert, “Of Menace and Mimicry,” 410.

⁵² Barmé, “China’s Flat Earth: History and 8 August 2008.”

internationalizing its economy and international acceptance, must make sure its propaganda machine will not overdo its spin. Will the Games strengthen the Chinese party-state as the Berlin Games invigorated the Hitler government?”⁵³ Days after the Opening Ceremony, *New Yorker* staff writer Anthony Lane asked: “What kind of society is it that can afford to make patterns out of its people?”⁵⁴ He continued, “Nobody will ever surpass the mathematical majesty of that night in Beijing, and, in retrospect, that may be a good thing.”⁵⁵ Like Xu, Lane compared the Opening Ceremony to the 1936 Berlin Olympics, a commonly cited example of how spectacle can serve authoritarian nationalism.

These interpretations may be shaped by western preconceptions of China — note Lane’s reference to the drummers’ “mathematical” precision. In *The China Fantasy*, James Mann warned of such tropes: “Before and during the Beijing Olympics of 2008, you will be bombarded with stereotypes about China that have accumulated over hundreds of years.”⁵⁶ A double standard is also at play. On the Olympic stage, displays of nationalism are usually excused, even expected — not compared to the Third Reich. Notably, 2008 was the first year the Games were hosted in an East Asian country without U.S. military bases, suggesting that perceptions of the Opening Ceremony as “threatening” stemmed from a broader anxiety over the shifting global order.⁵⁷ Critical reception was compounded by the historic geopolitical tensions between China and the west.⁵⁸ Jeffrey Wasserstrom refers to the negative discourse of China as part of the “American China Nightmare,” a cultural counterpoint to the “American China Dream,” both

⁵³ Xu, *Olympic Dreams*, 227.

⁵⁴ Anthony Lane, “The Only Games in Town: Week One at the Olympics,” *The New Yorker*, August 15, 2008, 28. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/08/25/the-only-games-in-town>

⁵⁵ Lane, “The Only Games in Town.”

⁵⁶ James Mann, *The China Fantasy: How Our Leaders Explain Away Chinese Repression* (Viking, 2007).

⁵⁷ Susan Brownell, “The Beijing Olympics as a Turning Point? China’s First Olympics in East Asian Perspective.” *Japan Focus* 7, no. 23.

⁵⁸ Brownell, “The Beijing Olympics as a Turning Point?”

shaped by stereotypes that frame U.S. perceptions of China.⁵⁹ Vilifying China fuels American nationalism, just as anti-western rhetoric has historically reinforced Chinese nationalism.

In this vein, Zhang's creative team created a spectacle that functioned as a business proposal that was meant to be inviting and assertive, not coercive or menacing. Although Chinese symbols of militancy were invoked, they were also inverted. The most direct nod to Chinese martial tradition came midway through the ceremony, when 2,008 Tai Chi masters formed coordinated, geometric patterns thematically aligned with the dance of the drummers and other preceding acts.⁶⁰ However, this display was not widely seen as a threat. Instead, it drew on Tai Chi's connection to the elements and the harmony between body and environment. A child's drawing of a smiling sun over bright, crayon-colored mountains was raised above the Tai Chi practitioners, while a burst of colorful birds was projected before them. Similarly, the drummers at the ceremony's opening were not typical military drummers. Their coordination of breath and movement resembled martial arts choreography more than modern military drills. The *fou* drum they beat was likely not a militaristic drum but a form of post-dinner entertainment for the ancients. Scholars debate the *fou*'s original use, with some suggesting it was used in rituals or repurposed from wine vessels.⁶¹

Other parts of the ceremony made direct references to military technology while similarly subverting expectations, using martial aesthetics to create an alluring rather than threatening display. The most striking example was the extensive use of fireworks to represent gunpowder, one of the “four great inventions” of ancient China. The footstep-shaped fireworks represented

⁵⁹ Wasserstrom, “Dreams and Nightmares.”

⁶⁰ “Art performance of Beijing Olympic Opening Ceremony showcases Chinese culture,” *Xinhua*, August 8, 2008.

https://web.archive.org/web/20080812013848/http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-08/08/content_9054650.htm

⁶¹ “Beijing's Olympic Venues to Be Used for Public Benefit.” *China Daily*, August 30, 2008.

https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2008-08/30/content_6983940.htm; Musical Instrument Museum in Phoenix, AZ.

the heritage of the Games and inserted Beijing into the Olympic tradition as the 29th “step.” Here, gunpowder, vis-à-vis its depiction in the firework display, became a symbol of unity and continuity rather than destruction.

We may further access the symbolism of the ceremony by using Kracauer’s theory about mass choreography and collective aesthetics. Like the Tiller Girl kickline Kracauer describes,⁶² the Opening Ceremony presented a highly regimented yet non-militaristic display of geometric human movement. “The meaning of the living star formations in the stadiums is not that of military exercises,” writes Kracauer, insisting the formations “have no meaning beyond themselves, and the masses above whom they rise are not a moral unit like a company of soldiers.”⁶³ Mass spectacles like these are widely accepted and digested. As Kracauer notes: “These extravagant spectacles, which are staged by many sorts of people and not just girls and stadium crowds, have long since become an established form.”⁶⁴ The audience, too, is part of the mass spectacle: “The regularity of their patterns is cheered by the masses, themselves arranged by the stands in tier upon ordered tier.”⁶⁵ Kracauer likens such spectacles to the mechanized coordination of the Fordist assembly line: “Everyone does his or her task on the conveyor belt, performing a partial function without grasping the totality.”⁶⁶ The effect of such spectacles is the aestheticization, romanticization, and normalization of capitalism, which requires the disaggregation of the body into its parts before they are reincorporated into the apparatus of industrial production.

Writing in the final years of the Weimar Republic, Kracauer explored how mass culture and spectacle shaped collective consciousness, particularly as mechanized labor and rationalized

⁶² The Tiller Girls were a popular dance troupe in the 1890s, the predecessors to the modern Rockettes.

⁶³ Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, 77.

⁶⁴ Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, 77.

⁶⁵ Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, 77.

⁶⁶ Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, 79.

production permeated everyday life. Fordist mass production restructured industrial work and found expression in cultural forms — most notably synchronized dance performances, which Kracauer saw as emblematic of the modern mass ornament. The aestheticization of Fordist production, however, is not uniquely capitalist. Mass spectacles were a central tool in Mao's socialist aesthetics; he and senior CCP members regularly orchestrated political parades.⁶⁷ North Korea, too, has perfected mass coordination with its annual Arirang Mass Games — originally inspired by Stalinist mass displays — featuring elaborate card stunts and highly-choreographed gymnastics performed by thousands.⁶⁸ Yet, as Barmé notes, Zhang made a concerted effort to avoid referencing Maoist-era parades and the Arirang Games, though “he would eventually claim, perhaps with a measure of ironic pride, that only North Korea could have outdone his display of co-ordinated mass movement.”⁶⁹ These parallels in aestheticizing industrial production do not imply ideological alignment but rather a shared valorization of modernization, an aspiration common to both Marxist-Leninist and capitalist states.⁷⁰ On another level, borrowing the visual language of socialist mass choreography allows the ceremony to endorse capitalist production subtly, orchestrating the “imaginary coexistence of socialism and capitalism” that Huang refers to.

This projected coexistence portrayed by the 2008 Opening Ceremony may have been inspired by the first Games that Chinese athletes and politicians attended, the 1984 Los Angeles

⁶⁷ Hung Chang-Tai, “Mao’s Parades: State Spectacles in China in the 1950s.” *The China Quarterly*, 2007, 411.

⁶⁸ Lisa Burnett, “Let Morning Shine over Pyongyang: The Future-Oriented Nationalism of North Korea’s *Arirang Mass Games*,” *Asian Music* 44, no. 1 (2013): 3. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/amu.2013.0010>; Jonathan Watts, “Welcome to the strangest show on earth,” *The Guardian*, October 1, 2005. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/oct/01/northkorea>

⁶⁹ Barmé, “China’s Flat Earth: History and 8 August 2008”; Ying Zhang and Chen Xia, “*Zhang Yimou jiemi kaimushi*” (“张艺谋揭秘开幕式”), translated as “Zhang Yimou reveals the secrets of the Opening Ceremony,” *Nanfang zhounmo* (南方周末), “Olympics special,” August 14, 2008, p. A6.

⁷⁰ “Based on Marx’s thesis that development of the forces of production is the key factor in social progress, the main task of progressive forces is to create (or maintain) the conditions for fast ‘modernization,’ while avoiding all forms of instability.” Žižek, “Three Notes on China: Past and Present,” 719.

Olympics.⁷¹ As journalist Miles Osgood notes, the LA Games were “one of the most garishly designed and overtly corporate Olympics ever.”⁷² Serving as a cultural front in the Cold War between the U.S. and the USSR, the 1984 Olympics became one of the most profitable in history, yielding a \$233 million profit from a modest budget through brand sponsorships and advertising that produced revenue as well as projected capitalist aesthetics.⁷³ Anthropologist Susan Brownell writes that the LA Olympics inspired a greater embrace of consumerist aesthetics in China’s 1987 National Games, a precursor to what would come in 2008.⁷⁴ Though the 2008 Beijing Games did not adopt the same overtly capitalist style as the LA Games, they were far more extravagant, generating only \$3.6 billion in revenue against \$40 billion in costs.⁷⁵

The 2008 Beijing Opening Ceremony thus presents a paradox: it projects a mass spectacle rooted in socialist aesthetics to highlight China’s market-driven modernization. While borrowing some visual language from socialist mass performances, it avoids direct references to Mao, constructing an image of China that reconciles ideological contradictions. At the same time, the ceremony ensures continuity with its communist origins, as evidenced by the absence of branding and corporate advertising, while affirming China’s integration into a globalized capitalist economy. The Games do not merely represent China’s economic rise but actively aestheticize it, transforming industrial production, mass coordination, and national ambition into a seamless, consumable image for both domestic and international audiences.

⁷¹ Miles Osgood. “What Everyone Got Wrong About the Last Beijing Olympics’ Opening Ceremony.” *Slate*. February 3, 2022.

<https://slate.com/culture/2022/02/2008-beijing-olympics-opening-ceremony-zhang-yimou-meaning.html>

⁷² Osgood, “What Everyone Got Wrong About the Last Beijing Olympics’ Opening Ceremony.”

⁷³ Les Carpenter, “The miracle of 1984: How Los Angeles saved the dying Olympics,” *The Washington Post*, July 21, 2024.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/olympics/2024/07/21/1984-olympics-los-angeles-us-summer-games/>

⁷⁴ Susan Brownell, *Training the body for China: Sports in the moral order of the people’s Republic*, (University of Chicago Press, 1995).

⁷⁵ James McBride, Noah Berman, and Melissa Manno, “The Economics of Hosting the Olympic Games” *The Council of Foreign Relations*. July 20, 2024.

<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/economics-hosting-olympic-games>

An Empire of Production

The economic transformation that the ceremony captured began just 30 years before the Games.⁷⁶ In 1978, two years after Mao's death, Deng Xiaoping became China's new chairman. Under Deng, the CCP embarked on a transition from Maoism to a market-driven economic system, which he referred to as "socialism with Chinese characteristics."⁷⁷ This era of "Opening Up and Reform" entailed relaxed economic restrictions and the creation of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) — areas of free trade designed to attract foreign businesses.⁷⁸ The impact of these reforms cannot be overstated: the percentage of impoverished villagers dropped from 40.65 percent before 1978 to 4.75 percent in 2001.⁷⁹

China also became increasingly integrated into international trade.⁸⁰ Collaboration between American and Chinese business interests led to China's rebranding as an "empire of production," just as America was becoming an "empire of consumption."⁸¹ The CCP intentionally devalued the RMB to lower Chinese prices in the global market, boosting its competitiveness.⁸² The competitive prices of Chinese goods and labor are often cited as one of the key drivers of China's post-Mao rapid economic growth — under President Jiang Zemin and

⁷⁶ There are valid claims that China has always leaned capitalist, even under Mao. See: Jacob Eyferth, "Consumption, Consumerism, Capitalism," *PRC History Review* 5, no. 1 (October 2020): 1–26.

⁷⁷ Deng Xiaoping, "Building Socialism with a Specifically Chinese Character," *People's Daily*, October 1, 1984. <http://newlearningonline.com/new-learning/chapter-4/deng-xiaoping-socialism-with-chinese-characteristics>

⁷⁸ Justin Yifu Lin, Cai Fang, and Li Zhou, *The China Miracle: Development Strategy and Economic Reform* (The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2003), 193. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1fj84hd>.

⁷⁹ Loren Brandt, and Thomas G. Rawski, *China's Great Economic Transformation*, (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 3. However, there is room for debate on this common state-centric narrative. Odd Arne Westad and Jian Chen contend in their 2024 book *The Great Transformation* that China's economic miracle was a bottom-up transformation, and that "the revolution from below did more to change China than any orders issued by the CCP." Westad and Chen, *The Great Transformation*, 306.

⁸⁰ Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (Harvard University Press, 2006), 191–284.

⁸¹ Maier, *Among Empires*; Elizabeth O'Brien Ingleson, *Made in China: When US-China Interests Converged to Transform Global Trade* (Yale University Press, 2010), 266. See also: Judith Stein, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the 1970s* (Harvard University Press, 2024), 23–50.

⁸² Katarzyna Twarowska, "Reforms of China's Exchange Rate Regime and the Renminbi Internationalization," *Ekonoma Prawo* 18, no. 4 (2019): 531–556.

Premier Zhu Rongji, China emerged as the “factory of the world.”⁸³ Just five months after Beijing won the bid to host the Games, China joined the World Trade Organization.⁸⁴ By 2008, “Made in China” labels adorned countless consumer goods, from the shirts tourists wore to the Games to the televisions that streamed the Opening Ceremony — even if, as was often the case, parts of these goods were made in other countries.⁸⁵ China’s national rebranding as an essential participant in the global economy was reinforced by the branding of these “Made in China” labels.

However, maintaining competitive prices comes at the expense of the livelihoods of the Chinese laborers who produce cheap goods for export, a status quo upheld by the government through strict anti-union and anti-labor activism policies.⁸⁶ Anthropologist David Harvey describes China’s new economic policy, with its “reconstitution of class power,” as state-controlled neoliberalism rather than “socialism with Chinese characteristics” as the CCP insists.⁸⁷ In the post-Mao period, ideological commitment took a backseat to national prosperity, a sentiment famously encapsulated by Deng’s justification for reform: “crossing the river by

⁸³ Twarowska, “Reforms of China’s Exchange Rate Regime and the Renminbi Internationalization”; Schell and Delury, *Wealth and Power*, 328.

⁸⁴ Weysyee Goh and Wee-Yeap Lau, “Impact of Structural Change on China’s Exports Post-WTO Accession.” *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations* 6, no. 2: 741.

⁸⁵ Ingleson, 266; David Barboza, “‘Made in China Labels’ Don’t Tell the Whole Story,” *The New York Times*, February 6, 2006.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/08/business/worldbusiness/made-in-china-labels-dont-tell-whole-story.html> ; Jenny Chan and Ngai Pun, “Suicide as Protest for the New Generation of Chinese Migrant Workers: Foxconn, Global Capital, and the State,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, September 13, 2010. <https://apjjf.org/jenny-chan/3408/article>

⁸⁶ Tim Pringle, *Trade Unions in China: The Challenge of Labour Unrest* (Routledge, 2011).

⁸⁷ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 120-151; Harvey’s definition of neoliberalism is as follows: “Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.” Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 2.

feeling the stones.”⁸⁸ China’s post-reform economic success has much to do with the global rise in neoliberalism in advanced capitalist economies.⁸⁹

It is important to recognize that China’s suppression of labor rights was integral to its assimilation into the global economic system, gaining a foothold by setting prices below the fair cost of labor. China’s reputation as the world’s factory came at the expense of Chinese wage laborers, benefiting foreign (typically western) companies and consumers.⁹⁰ We can understand the experiences of Chinese assembly line workers within Kracauer’s framework. Zhang Lijia, a former worker at a missile factory in Liming, wrote in her memoir that the rush home resembled a “surging tide” of factory workers, “each bobbing black head another faceless part of the Liming factory machine.”⁹¹ A separate account comes from Li Hai, a 19-year-old migrant worker at Foxconn, a Shenzhen-based manufacturing company for electronics, who jumped to his death during a wave of suicide attempts at the two main production facilities in 2010.⁹² In his suicide note, he wrote that he found “fitting into the robotic assembling process, at high speed and to a precision measured down to the second, most difficult.”⁹³ Outside observers echo this mechanical precision demanded of Chinese factory workers. A writer for *Audio Technology* who visited a Shenzhen International Audio Group factory wrote: “This was a ‘by hand’ mass-production line where everyone’s job was carefully supervised, where quality control had

⁸⁸ Bernard Z. Keo, “Crossing the River by Feeling the Stones: Deng Xiaoping in the Making of Modern China,” Association for Asian Studies, May 24, 2023. <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/eaa/archives/crossing-the-river-by-feeling-the-stones-deng-xiaoping-in-the-making-of-modern-china/>.

⁸⁹ Keo, “Crossing the River by Feeling the Stones.”

⁹⁰ Chan and Pun, “Suicide as Protest.”

⁹¹ Zhang Lijia, “*Socialism Is Great!*”: A Worker’s Memoir of the New China, (Atlas, 2008), 49.

⁹² Chan and Pun, “Suicide as Protest.”

⁹³ Chan and Pun, “Suicide as Protest.”

been adopted with a systematic mastery and sophistication that I had arrogantly assumed only existed in places like Germany and Switzerland.”⁹⁴

While China’s reforms came in the post-Fordist age, they mirror a similar mechanization of human labor that Kracauer described over half a century earlier, with employees on the assembly line performing a “partial function without grasping the totality.”⁹⁵ Crucially, this conveyor belt operates based on scientific principles that ostensibly optimize efficiency and productivity. Organization is key: “The organization stands above the masses, a monstrous figure whose creator withdraws it from the eyes of its bearers.”⁹⁶ Li Hai’s characterization of the “robotic” process reflects Kracauer’s claims that the assembly line workers “do not become masters of the machine but instead become machine-like,” and that they are “henchmen of the technological excesses.”⁹⁷

The similarities between these accounts and those of Amazon workers in America are striking.⁹⁸ My point here is neither to localize the problems of global capitalism nor to pity its victims, but to demonstrate how recurring themes of industrial production transcend borders and how global audiences have internalized the “aesthetic reflex of the rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires,” as Kracauer writes.⁹⁹ It is this “aesthetic reflex” that

⁹⁴ Andy Stewart, “Made in China,” *Audio Technology*, 36.

https://www.audiotехnology.com/PDF/FEATURES/AT36_IAG_factory_MadeInChina.pdf

⁹⁵ Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, 79.

⁹⁶ Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, 79.

⁹⁷ Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, 70.

⁹⁸ “Here is an uncomfortable truth I’m waiting for some Chinese official to point out: The woman from the hinterland working in Shenzhen is arguably better off economically than an American in Chicago living on minimum wage. She can save most of what she makes and feel she is on the way up; the American can’t and doesn’t. Over the next two years, the minimum wage in the United States is expected to rise to \$7.25 an hour. Assuming a 40-hour week, that’s just under \$1,200 per month, or about 10 times the Chinese factory wage. But that’s before payroll deductions and the cost of food and housing, which are free or subsidized in China’s factory towns.” James Fallows, “China Makes, the World Takes.” See also: Mandy McClure and Victoria Godinez “US Department of Labor finds Amazon exposed workers to unsafe conditions, ergonomic hazards at three more warehouses in Colorado, Idaho, New York,” *US Department of Labor*, February 1, 2023.

<https://www.dol.gov/newsroom/releases/osha/osha20230201-0>

⁹⁹ Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, 79.

Beijing’s Opening Ceremony catered to in gestures towards the “prevailing economic system” that both western audiences and Chinese performers shared, even if their functions within that system differed. The relationship between the ceremony’s audience and performers mirrored the relationship between China and the west within said economic system: that of the consumer and the producer, respectively.

Made in China

At times, China is privileged by its position as “factory of the world.” China largely avoided the devastation wrought by the global financial crisis, which began to unravel in late 2007 and ultimately imploded a month after the end of the Games with the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers in mid-September of 2008.¹⁰⁰ Of course, China did not entirely escape the crisis — its heavy reliance on the export sector resulted in the closure of tens of thousands of factories.¹⁰¹ Still, China’s financial sector remained mostly intact because it had large foreign reserves and did not deal with as many derivatives as western markets.¹⁰² China also mitigated damage with a stimulus package, part of which was directed to repair damage from the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake, alongside aggressive fiscal and loose monetary policy.¹⁰³

Jennifer Hubbert argues that the 2008 Games marked a turning point in the global financial order, observing that many countries now “bypass western-dominated institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank and turn to China to bolster their development.” Hubbert views this shift as a sign of a “changing power field” and suggests it signals “a future of greatness for China rather than ‘modernity — not quite.’”¹⁰⁴ The Opening

¹⁰⁰ Linda Yueh, “A Stronger China.” *International Monetary Fund* 47, no. 2 (June 2010). <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2010/06/yueh.htm>

¹⁰¹ Chan and Pun, “Suicide as Protest.”

¹⁰² Yueh, “A Stronger China.”

¹⁰³ Yueh, “A Stronger China.”

¹⁰⁴ Hubbert, “Of Menace and Mimicry,” 421.

Ceremony services this image of China's singular, and decidedly non-western, greatness. Again, the ceremony was void of corporate branding; while the committee received branding sponsorships, all partnerships and advertisements were displayed off-site.¹⁰⁵

The spectacle produced by the Opening Ceremony was itself a product consumed by billions. As Guy Debord notes, “The time spent consuming images... is both the particular terrain where the spectacle’s mechanisms are most fully implemented and the general goal that those mechanisms present, the focus and epitome of all particular consumptions.”¹⁰⁶ Ironically, China’s depiction of industrial production was also a good to be consumed that was “Made in China.” Moreover, the ceremony’s special focus on China’s technological advancements — rather than its cultural developments, such as art and philosophy — is significant. By centering China’s “four great inventions,” the ceremony underscored how tools made in China have long influenced western historical progress.

The portrayal of these inventions through dance emphasizes the role of physical labor in their creation. The act representing “papermaking” did not center paper as a material. Rather, the ceremony used the paper as a stage, stressing its role as a medium for human creation. A giant scroll of canvas was suspended from above as an ensemble of black-costumed dancers created an ink wash *shan shui* (山水) with brushes hidden in their sleeves. They rolled and slid across the canvas, mimicking the strokes of an inked paintbrush. The painting itself is nothing remarkable, more a child’s attempt at a landscape than a traditional *shan shui* painting. The dance, instead, is the product, and the art lies in the use of the body as the tool of production. Such capitalization of human labor is both the result and romanticized aesthetic under Kracauer’s principles.

¹⁰⁵ BOCOG, “Preparation for the Games.”

¹⁰⁶ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 83.



Figure 6: The papermaking act. Each dancer is an ink brush. Olympics.



Figure 7: The movable type act. Each performer is a block of type. Olympics.

The ceremony's portrayal of movable type follows these same principles. The typeset was scaled up to awe-inspiring proportions; the blocks of type moved in precise, rhythmic waves, rippling like water. The typeset functioned as a pinscreen, forming different renditions of *he* (和), the Chinese character for “harmony.” At the end of the number, the blocks opened,

revealing that the typeset was not operated pneumatically but by 897 performers in boxes. It was a purposeful, gleeful reveal of the Mechanical Turk.¹⁰⁷

The “compass” act presented the most explicit reference to China’s wealth. The invention of the compass was visualized through the exploits of Ming Chinese admiral Zheng He, who led the Yongle Emperor’s vast maritime fleet.¹⁰⁸ Zheng He’s famed voyages are remembered for promoting Chinese soft power, showcasing the kingdom’s wealth of resources and goods to expand its tributary system.¹⁰⁹ His junks were laden with deposits of gold, silver, porcelain, and silk, which were traded for novelties from abroad.¹¹⁰ Like the preceding acts, the compass performance employed synchronized movement as its primary visual. Hundreds of dancers wielding giant oars moved in unison to simulate the motion of massive ships at sea, their bodies standing in for the vessels. The massive scale of coordination of the dancers’ oars evoked the grandeur of Zheng He’s junks, supposedly once the largest ships in the world. References to ancient and imperial China telegraph the CCP’s hopes for a renewed age of prosperity and growth — one that reimagined the Middle Kingdom at the center of the world once again, as the compass rose.

‘We don’t have control over our people like that’

As the world’s second-most populous nation, China’s prosperity is fueled by its enormous population, which provides an unparalleled reservoir of labor. The ceremony’s depiction of manufacturing hinged on portraying people as instruments of production: the drummers were the

¹⁰⁷ This was a popular hoax in the late 19th century that involved an intelligent automaton (the “Turk”) that could play chess. It was later revealed to be controlled by an expert chess player inside the machine. See: “Enlightened Automata,” ed. Clark et al., *The Sciences in Enlightened Europe* (The University of Chicago Press, 1999) 126–165.

¹⁰⁸ Mark Cartwright, “The Seven Voyages of Zheng He.” *World History Encyclopedia*, February 7, 2019.

¹⁰⁹ Cartwright, “The Seven Voyages of Zheng He.”

¹¹⁰ Cartwright, “The Seven Voyages of Zheng He.”

drumsticks, the dancers were the brushes, and the performers were the type blocks and oars of imperial junks. “How did they do it?” NBC commentator Bob Costas asked, “they did it with people.”¹¹¹ Beijing’s mass orchestration of performers is what led some western viewers to conclude that, more than a celebration, the ceremony was an assertion of China’s strict authoritarian control. In an episode of the American show *30 Rock*, Wesley tells Liz Lemon, “I can’t suffer through the London Olympics. We’re not prepared, Liz! Did you see the Beijing Opening Ceremonies? We don’t have control over our people like that.”¹¹²

Although such interpretations missed the ceremony’s capitalist messaging, they correctly recognized the ceremony’s proud demonstration of China’s capacity to mobilize and manage its large population. Moreover, the ceremony’s synchronized aesthetics also projected an image of national unity. This messaging is rooted in its references to socialism; the CCP holds that national unity relies on the preservation of its one-party system. As Slavoj Žižek notes, China derides movements for workers’ rights and multiparty democracy as threats to the stability China has enjoyed since the establishment of its current government in 1949.¹¹³ He writes: “The conclusion is clear: in China, only Communist Party leadership can sustain rapid modernization under conditions of social stability; the official (Confucian) term is that China should become a ‘harmonious society.’”¹¹⁴ The next chapter will delve into the stakes of China’s professed commitment to such a society. In such critiques, we cannot forget that the west is entangled in the cruelties of China’s state-controlled modernization. China’s low wages are a response to western demand; Apple, Foxconn’s biggest client, increases its profit margin by sourcing its parts

¹¹¹ Osgood, “What Everyone Got Wrong About the Last Beijing Olympics’ Opening Ceremony.”

¹¹² Tina Fey (show creator), *30 Rock*. Season 4, episode 21, “Emmanuelle Goes to Dinosaur Land,” aired May 13 2010, in broadcast syndication, *NBC*.

¹¹³ Žižek, “Three Notes on China: Past and Present,” 719.

¹¹⁴ Žižek, “Three Notes on China: Past and Present,” 719.

as cheaply as possible. This raises the question: Who truly stands to benefit from China's modernization?

CHAPTER TWO: ‘A New Era’

Zhang Yimou’s Second Chance

Before Zhang Yimou won the bid to be the lead director of the 2008 Opening Ceremony,¹¹⁵ he had a mixed reputation within his home country. In 1994, when Zhang released his seminal work *To Live*, a film about a family struggling to survive as the Communists came to power, he was sanctioned by the government and forbidden to receive foreign funding for his films for five years.¹¹⁶ Chinese authorities also prevented him from attending the Cannes Film Festival, where *To Live* won multiple awards and was a contender for Best Feature Film.¹¹⁷ This was the second time one of Zhang’s films was nominated for the Palme d’Or; four years earlier, his film *Ju Dou*, a film about a woman sold to an abusive business owner, had also received a nomination.¹¹⁸ However, as Zhang rose to prominence in the west, his films were regularly censored and censured within China. Many citizens derided Zhang for reinforcing prejudiced understandings of China and its people as culturally and morally backward.¹¹⁹ Jennifer Hubbert records an exchange she had in 2008 with one of her students in Kunming who claimed that Zhang “exaggerates [China’s problems] on purpose… He exoticizes the problem and then it seems that this is all there is of China. Foreign audiences are looking for this. It’s what they expect.”¹²⁰ Many of Hubbert’s interviewees echo this sentiment, believing that Zhang’s Opening

¹¹⁵ While the exact role of Zhang’s co-directors is not well-defined in public documents, and it is certain that Zhang received a lot of help from them, I will be heretofore attributing all of the creative decisions to Zhang since he was head director and, therefore, was ultimately responsible for every creative decision that was or was not made, even if he himself did not come up with all of them.

¹¹⁶ Osgood, “What Everyone Got Wrong About the Last Beijing Olympics’ Opening Ceremony.”

¹¹⁷ David Barboza, “Gritty Renegade Now Directs China’s Close-Up.”

¹¹⁸ “Official Selection 1990: All the Selection,” Festival de Cannes, 1990,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20131214195202/http://www.festival-cannes.fr/en/archives/1990/allSelections.html>.

¹¹⁹ Hubbert, “Of Menace and Mimicry,” 419.

¹²⁰ Hubbert, “Of Menace and Mimicry,” 419.

Ceremony was a chance for him to redeem himself and the country he had profited from pillorying.

Through carefully choreographed performances and historical symbolism, the 2008 Opening Ceremony depicted a China that was powerful and unified, rooted in a bastardized definition of the Confucian ideal of “harmony.” In Confucius’s view, harmony did not entail conformity: in *The Analects*, he proclaims “*Junzi he er butong*” (“君子和而不同”), which loosely translates to “a gentleman”¹²¹ is harmonious while maintaining difference.” However, in the Opening Ceremony, “harmony” was portrayed through uniformity, emphasizing collective order over individual distinction. The ceremony’s interpretation of Confucianism exemplified China’s use of the ideology as a cultural and ideological tool to reinforce social cohesion and national identity.¹²²

Yet, the state’s vision of harmony stood in stark contrast to the political realities of 2008. Just months before the Olympics, a major Tibetan uprising challenged the very narrative of unity that the ceremony sought to affirm. Protests erupted across Tibet and were met with a swift and forceful state crackdown. Internationally, the uprising intensified scrutiny of China’s human rights record; domestically, the uprising reinforced the government’s commitment to controlling China’s national image.

‘Condemn it if you like’

Far from a grassroots renegade, Zhang matured as an artist within state cultural institutions. At 20, he worked as a cadre in Daxing County’s Mao Thought Propaganda Station

¹²¹ What I translate as gentleman here could also be translated as “noble man” for to be a gentleman, in Confucius’s eyes, was to be the ideal man. This was the model he believed all should aspire to.

¹²² Schneider, *Staging China*, 182.

for five years.¹²³ He rose through the ranks of state-sponsored film and cultural organizations before becoming Party Secretary of the Beijing Cultural Bureau.¹²⁴ The same year he directed the Opening Ceremony, Zhang became head of the Beijing People's Art Theatre and joined the country's top political advisory body.¹²⁵ Indeed, there has always been a cozy relationship between China and its controversial new wave directors, the so-called “Fifth Generation” to which Zhang belongs. During the peak of the new wave movement, Chen Kaige, one of the most prominent members of the Fifth Generation, was approached by PLA commanders who wanted to increase the reach of their propaganda films. Zhang worked as a cinematographer for Chen’s resulting 1986 film *The Big Parade*.¹²⁶ This collaboration epitomized the intricate nexus between avant-garde cinema and military public relations in China, demonstrating how state power and artistic innovation converge to shape national narratives.

Zhang’s movies from the 1990s are the products of a brief period of artistic exploration into the complex social issues he observed growing up. *To Live* may have been partially inspired by Zhang’s difficult childhood (his family was a target of the Cultural Revolution due to his father’s affiliation with the Kuomintang during the Chinese Civil War¹²⁷). In any case, *To Live* “was the last time he seriously challenged government censors,” Zhang’s production manager told *The New York Times*.¹²⁸ From the 2000s onwards, Zhang’s films became decidedly less critical of the government. Leading up to the Olympics, Zhang departed drastically from the style he established with his revolutionary China-era films and directed three big-budget martial arts films that broke Chinese box office records. In 2007, he defended his new “international and

¹²³ Barmé, “China’s Flat Earth: History and 8 August 2008.”

¹²⁴ Barmé, “China’s Flat Earth: History and 8 August 2008.”

¹²⁵ Barboza, “Gritty Renegade Now Directs China’s Close-Up”; Barmé.

¹²⁶ Barmé, “China’s Flat Earth: History and 8 August 2008.”

¹²⁷ Amy Tikkannen, “Zhang Yimou,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, May 19, 2010, last updated December 7, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Zhang-Yimou>

¹²⁸ Barboza, “Gritty Renegade Now Directs China’s Close-Up.”

modern” taste, telling *The New York Times* that “China has stepped into a new era, an era of consumption and entertainment,” adding, “you can condemn it if you like, but it is a trend of globalization.”¹²⁹ In return for Zhang’s artistic contributions, Beijing promoted his work, granting prime opening dates, supporting his Oscar bids, and hand-picking him to direct the Olympic ceremonies.¹³⁰

Regardless of if Zhang was fully trusted to lead the ceremonies, he did not have the chance to go rogue: His co-directors were all card-carrying members of the PLA, with a deputy minister of propaganda overseeing the first half of the Opening Ceremony.¹³¹ This raises the question: Why did the Beijing Olympic Organizing Committee bother with Zhang at all? Susan Brownell sees the move to choose Zhang as director of the Olympic ceremonies as one that “prioritize[d] international tastes over domestic.”¹³² Zhang’s banned movies are some of China’s most popular cinematic exports, and the preparations for the Olympics were primarily concerned with impressing western audiences. Writer Zhang Lijia quotes a 67-year-old Olympic volunteer who rejected the stereotypes historically projected onto China: “I want foreigners to see what China has achieved. We were called the ‘sick man of Asia.’ Now we are strong and rich enough to hold such a major international event.”¹³³ The term “sick man of Asia” historically denoted China’s perceived weakness — a legacy that contemporary state narratives as well as Chinese citizens have long sought to overcome. This desire shaped the Opening Ceremony’s presentation of China.

Zhang was candid about his objective to rehabilitate China’s image through the ceremonies. He claims to have no interest in politics but in “do[ing] something for the Chinese

¹²⁹ Barboza, “Gritty Renegade Now Directs China’s Close-Up.”

¹³⁰ Barboza, “Gritty Renegade Now Directs China’s Close-Up.”

¹³¹ Barmé, “China’s Flat Earth: History and 8 August 2008.”

¹³² Brownell, “The Beijing Olympics as a Turning Point?”

¹³³ Zhang Lijia, “Hand Grenades and the Olympics,” in *China in 2008: A Year of Great Significance*, ed. Merkel-Hess, et al., 168.

people.”¹³⁴ Reflecting on his work in 2008, Zhang told *Xinhua* that he was far more proud of his direction over the ceremonies than any of his movies:

From the very beginning, you know that behind you is the country and all the Chinese people, which is a heavy responsibility. You are not solely representing yourself, so success is not personal success. I don’t know how many people’s blood, sweat, and tears were required to achieve the brilliant bloom that night, which makes it all the more meaningful.¹³⁵

He explained that the directorial team was motivated by the slogan displayed in their headquarters: “*zuguode liyi gaoyu yiqie*,” (“祖国利益高于一切”), or “benefit the motherland above all.”¹³⁶

‘Benefit the Motherland’

Zhang’s assignment was to tell a “good China story,” to put it in the words of Xi Jinping at the 2013 National Conference on Thought and Propaganda.¹³⁷ The spectacle crafted by the ceremony directors aimed to overcome crippling Orientalist stereotypes depicting opium sickness, impoverished rural traditionalism, and “countless little people with chopsticks and pigtails” through the volume of its drum rolls and the “brilliant bloom” of its fireworks. But the ceremony embraced and reworked other Orientalist stereotypes. The ceremony’s mass spectacle embodied Ebert’s trope of “countless little people” and reinforced the “mathematical” technical

¹³⁴ Barboza, “Gritty Renegade Now Directs China’s Close-Up.”

¹³⁵ “Beijing Opening Ceremony will be Historic, says Chief Director Zhang Yimou,” *Xinhua Net*, January 7, 2022. <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/20220107/d968df5ffef434c80d171abe6a2a430/c.html>; I’ve tailored the translation to better fit English grammar.

¹³⁶ Barmé, “China’s Flat Earth: History and 8 August 2008.”

¹³⁷ “[We] must meticulously and properly conduct external propaganda, innovating external propaganda methods, working hard to create new concepts, new categories and new expressions that integrate the Chinese and the foreign, telling good China stories, communicating China’s voice well.” Xi Jinping, National Conference on Thought and Propaganda, 2013, translated by the *Chinese Media Project*; “telling good China stories,” originally “*Jiang hao zhongguo gushi*” (“讲好中国故事”) is also translated as “telling China’s stories well,” though scholar David Wang makes a case for understanding his meaning as “good China stories” in his book *Why Fiction Matters in Contemporary China*.

prowess often attributed to Asian people. Ultimately, the goal of the ceremony was not to challenge western stereotypes of China but to “benefit the Motherland.”

Even portrayals of China’s weakness can serve the state by rallying support to defend its national image. The CCP actively reminds the public of China’s erstwhile “sick man” status, memorializing the first day of Japanese occupation as “National Humiliation Day”¹³⁸ and, as Schell and Delury note, “children are still exhorted to ‘never forget national humiliation and strengthen our national defense.’”¹³⁹ Since Chairman Jiang Zemin’s tenure, Chinese media has “further entrench[ed] a popular impression of China as predominantly [a] victim and colonial subject.”¹⁴⁰ The CCP is effectively granted a blank check — any means for China’s economic “recovery” are appropriate when one believes that the country is “behind” the west in industrial development due to its past impoverishment at the hands of foreign empires and enterprises. Under this logic, even rapid, disruptive industrialization and urbanization become legitimized.

When framed within a narrative of victimhood, the Opening Ceremony becomes a project of redemption, and Zhang Yimou a national hero. Zhang must have understood this when he admitted that he felt “the country and all the Chinese people” were behind him. He was the architect of a digestible culture and grand narrative that bolstered the CCP’s modernization policies. The ceremony’s central theme of “harmony” refers to both the directives of Chairman Hu Jintao to build a “Harmonious Socialist Society” as well as the Confucian virtue. By invoking Confucius, the CCP enshrined party loyalty in the revered words of China’s greatest sage, molding its historical narrative to affirm national identity and legitimize modern aspirations.

¹³⁸ Schell and Delury, *Wealth and Power*, 7.

¹³⁹ Schell and Delury, *Wealth and Power*, 7.

¹⁴⁰ Barmé, “China’s Flat Earth: History and 8 August 2008”; Jiang Zemin’s term as president ended in 2003.

Hubbert's students were excited about the cultural learning that would take place at the Olympics, hopeful that the event would give westerners a chance to better understand Chinese culture. As one student noted, "China is different from other places. It has a very long history; it definitely has the longest history of all the Olympic cities. When people get to Beijing, they will see a mix of the modern and the traditional; this is China." A different student shared this enthusiasm, saying their "favorite parts of the Opening Ceremony were those that reflected traditional Chinese culture, particularly the Confucian *Analects* section." For this student, the ceremony's depiction of "China's 5,000-year history ... wasn't about displaying how strong China is but showing the world that China's culture and history are worth learning."¹⁴¹ Another student mentioned that he would have enjoyed Zhang's films more if they had shown "deeper ideas about Confucianism and Daoism."¹⁴²

It was almost as though the filmmaker had taken note of the critiques from Hubbert's students; since the 2000s, Zhang's films have celebrated traditional Chinese culture in magnificent imperial settings, and his Opening Ceremony interwove the references to Confucianism that he was once criticized for omitting. During the movable type act, performers in the attire of ancient Confucian scholars recited excerpts from Confucius's *The Analects*. Confucius saw himself as a transmitter of tradition and stressed the study of classical texts as an essential part of personal cultivation. The movable type act presented Confucianism itself as a cultural inheritance and Confucius's writings as part of the canon he encouraged his students to study.¹⁴³ By portraying movable type as both a technological achievement and a means of preserving Confucian teachings, the ceremony underscored the value of both innovation and

¹⁴¹ Hubbert, "Of Menace and Mimicry," 423.

¹⁴² It's significant that this student took note of these two belief systems specifically — while Confucianism and Daoism are not the only influential religions in China, they are the only ones indigenous to China, whereas Buddhism was introduced from India and Christianity was brought by western missionaries.

¹⁴³ Annping Chin, "Confucius." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, July 20, 1998, last updated February 17, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Confucius>

tradition, presenting them as complementary forces in a nation that is a “mix of the modern and the traditional.”

In China, Confucianism holds historical as well as cultural importance. After becoming the state ideology during the Han dynasty, Confucianism evolved through various neo-Confucian schools and greatly influenced imperial Chinese politics.¹⁴⁴ Florian Schneider argues that the Confucian value of harmony also “became a transitive concept that applied across time, even as it took different forms along the way.”¹⁴⁵ China’s long history is a common source of national pride, as reflected in Hubbert’s students’ fascination with the Opening Ceremony’s portrayal of “China’s 5,000-year history.” One will often hear claims that China has the longest continuous history in the world, though the starting point of China’s history is a matter of debate.¹⁴⁶ Still, this 5,000-year narrative is widely accepted, reinforcing the country’s traditionalist global image. As John Ross argues in *You Don’t Know China*, archaeology services politically conservative¹⁴⁷ agendas: “When dealing with China — whether trying to turn a profit or awaiting democratic reforms — the implication is you need to be more patient and just wait a little bit longer. After all, the country has five thousand years of history.”¹⁴⁸

China’s history, regardless of its exact length, boasts a wealth of ancient treasures. Stories of their rediscovery, whether fictionalized or documentary, are widely popular. Today, historian

¹⁴⁴ “Confucianism,” *National Geographic*, August 8, 2024.
<https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/confucianism/>

¹⁴⁵ Schneider, *Staging China*, 180.
¹⁴⁶ There were Neolithic cultures producing pottery in what is now China at least 4,000 years ago. Oracle bone inscriptions with the earliest form of Chinese characters go back 3,000 years. Not long after, bronzes were found with the word for China, *zhong guo* (中國). Others argue that the start of China was its unification under the Qin emperor in 221 BCE. See also: Charles O. Hucker et al., “History of China” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, October 2, 1998, last updated February 26, 2025; C. Aylmer, “Chinese Oracle Bones,” Cambridge Digital Library, <https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-CUL-00001-00155/1.>; Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian: Qin dynasty*, translated by Raymond Dawson, (Columbia University Press, 2007).
<https://books.google.com/books?id=ruicEVx96lwC>

¹⁴⁷ I use “conservative” here and throughout this chapter to denote literal conservatism, which is to say, fond of traditional values and averse to change.

¹⁴⁸ John Grant Ross, *You Don’t Know China*, (Camphor Press, 2014).
<https://www.camphorpress.com/5000-years-of-history/>

Peter Harmsen claims that Chinese archaeology is experiencing a “golden age.”¹⁴⁹ Against this backdrop, Zhang’s decision to begin the Opening Ceremony with the *fou* is especially notable. Relics from ancient China serve as powerful symbols of the country’s cultural wealth. In the past 50 years, the Chinese government has rebuilt old towns — or, more accurately, has constructed loosely historical replicas of traditional villages outfitted with malls and souvenir shops — to attract tourists. One striking example is Hongya Cave in Chongqing, often called China’s first real “cyberpunk city.”¹⁵⁰ At night, Hongya Cave’s architectural facsimiles, lined with LED strips, take on a sci-fi aesthetic reminiscent of the cyberpunk worlds envisioned in the 1980s, most famously exemplified by the LA cityscape in Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*. The Opening Ceremony captured this neo-retro Sino aesthetic with drummers in futuristic “Y3K” silver robes playing ancient bronze instruments.¹⁵¹ Just as the rafters of old stilt houses glow with tape lights in Hongya Cave, the *fou* drums were illuminated against the dark stadium by their embedded LED bulbs.

¹⁴⁹ Peter Harmsen, “The Indiana Jones Syndrome and the golden age of Chinese archaeology,” *University of Oxford School of Archaeology*, August 20, 2021.

<https://www.arch.ox.ac.uk/article/indiana-jones-syndrome-and-golden-age-chinese-archaeology>

¹⁵⁰ Asa Roast, “Three Theses on the Sinofuturist City,” in “Sinofuturism(s),” ed. Virginia L. Conn and Gabriele de Seta. *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2021): 81.

¹⁵¹ “Y3K” is Chinese internet terminology which denotes a fashion trend that has gained traction thanks to East Asian girl groups. It is characterized by its use of sleek silver attire and holographic jewelry.



Figure 8: Hongya Cave, Chongqing. “Hongya Cave at night from Qiansimen Bridge,” uploaded August 18, 2023, Wikimedia Commons.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:202308_Hongya_Cave_at_night_from_Qiansimen_Bridge.jpg

The ceremony presented a colorful visual representation of the “mix of the modern and the traditional” that make China, where ancient technologies are buttressed by newer ones — or where giant manually-moved type is illuminated by an even larger, computer-animated screen. The Opening Ceremony framed technological advancements not as a rupture with tradition but as its natural continuation. This hybridization of modernity and history suggests that China has always been at the cutting edge while remaining deeply rooted in tradition.

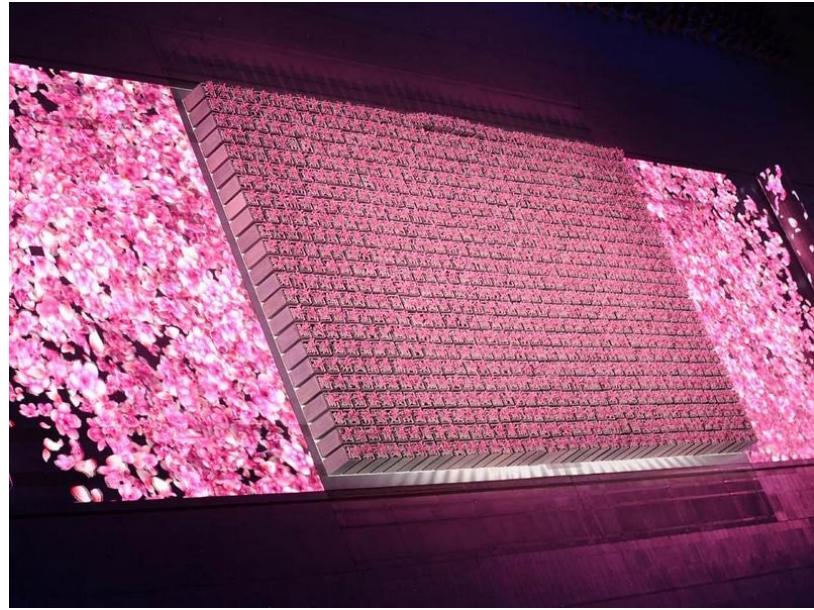


Figure 9: The Opening Ceremony's typeset was framed by a large computer-animated screen. Olympics.

Confronting Confucius

But China did not always embrace the cultural heritage the ceremony showcased. The ceremony's integration of symbols of Confucianism, nationalism, and modernization would have been inconceivable just 30 years earlier. For the better part of the past century, political leaders viewed Confucian traditionalism as an obstacle to national progress and development. As the Qing dynasty unraveled, Chinese political reformers like Liang Qichao struggled to reconcile Confucianism with the demands of modernization, viewing them as opposing forces.¹⁵² It was also Liang who coined the term “sick man of Asia,” or in Chinese, *dongfang bingfu* (东方病夫), to describe China’s political condition in the early 20th century.¹⁵³ This phrase came to define early modern China, marking a period known as the “century of humiliation” that spanned from the First Opium War to the end of World War II. The drive to heal the “sick man” and resist western imperial rivals spurred Chinese reform throughout the 20th century. Influenced by

¹⁵² Schell and Delury, *Wealth and Power*, 101.

¹⁵³ Schell and Delury, *Wealth and Power*, 95.

western theories of social Darwinism, Liang argued that China's weakness stemmed from its lack of "national consciousness" and the inability of Chinese citizens to see themselves as "citizens" of a unified nation.¹⁵⁴

Liang saw provisional authoritarian rule as essential for making citizens out of the common people.¹⁵⁵ Liang believed that the people needed to be instilled with nationalism, the new, fashionable ideology for developing countries in the 19th century. He lamented that even those who had immigrated to America "remained so trapped in their attachments to clan, village, native region, and ancient culture that they were unable to identify with the commonweal and behave as citizens of a larger, modern nation must."¹⁵⁶

This notion was later echoed by Sun Yat-Sen, nicknamed the "Father of the Nation."¹⁵⁷ Sun was initially a staunch advocate for establishing a western-style democracy, and he attempted, often unsuccessfully, to spark democratic revolutions while in exile.¹⁵⁸ Growing disillusioned, Sun introduced the concept of an authoritarian "political tutelage" stage — positioned as a precursor to the final stage of democracy — in his 1918 treatise "Three Stages of Revolution."¹⁵⁹ For Sun, instilling nationalist ideals in the people took precedence over his aspirations for democracy. Schell and Delury claim that China's current system of "authoritarian capitalism" directly draws from Sun's notion of political tutelage.¹⁶⁰

Like Sun and Liang, Chen Duxiu, the founder of the CCP, also pinpointed insufficient nationalism as the source of China's political weakness and blamed Confucian traditionalism,

¹⁵⁴ Schell and Delury, *Wealth and Power*, 98; Schell and Delury, *Wealth and Power*, 101.

¹⁵⁵ Schell and Delury, *Wealth and Power*, 106.

¹⁵⁶ Schell and Delury, *Wealth and Power*, 106.

¹⁵⁷ Schell and Delury, *Wealth and Power*, 119.

¹⁵⁸ Schell and Delury, *Wealth and Power*, 119.

¹⁵⁹ Theodore de Bary, Richard John Lufrano, Wing-tsit Chan, and John Berthrong, *Sources of Chinese Tradition, Volume II: From 1600 through the Twentieth Century* (Columbia University Press, 2000), 328-330.

¹⁶⁰ Schell and Delury, *Wealth and Power*, 140.

writing that Chinese people “care about their family and do not care about their nation.”¹⁶¹ Chen was part of the May Fourth movement of 1919, a radical intellectual movement that rejected traditional Chinese values.¹⁶² As historian Zhou Cezong notes, May Fourth youth “were clamoring against family, against religion, against old morals and old habits, and to break all old systems” in their desire to break free from oppressive systems. The movement decried tradition with great fervor, Zhou recalls: “I met someone in front of Beida Hospital. I asked her, ‘What’s your last name?’ She glared for a while and shouted, ‘I don’t have a surname!’”¹⁶³ For May Fourth intellectuals, adherence to tradition was to blame for China’s humiliation in the Opium Wars, the domination of foreign spheres of influence, government corruption, and social malaise. Instead, they placed their faith in the promises of “Mr. Science” and “Mr. Democracy,” hoping these ideals would modernize China and defend it from western imperialism.¹⁶⁴ The CCP, drawing from this ideological framework, pledged to destroy the old China, build a new one, and provide a strong leader to guide the nation on the long march to prosperity.

Mao’s greatest success lay in his ability to dismantle the old order. Hailing from a peasant background and declaring himself anti-Confucian from an early age, Mao was a lifelong iconoclast.¹⁶⁵ Under his rule, countless temples, cultural relics, and historical artifacts — Confucian or otherwise — were destroyed, and those associated with traditional knowledge were targeted in his campaign against the “Four Olds” (old thinking, old culture, old customs, and old habits).¹⁶⁶ No institution or tradition escaped his sweeping assault. “Criticize Confucius” became

¹⁶¹ Lee Feigon, *Chen Duxiu, Founder of the Chinese Communist Party* (Princeton University Press, 1983), 66.

¹⁶² Schell and Delury, *Wealth and Power*, 150.

¹⁶³ Zhou Cezong, *History of the May 4th Movement* (Beijing University Press, 1955). Translation is my own.

¹⁶⁴ Delury, “‘Harmonious’ in China.”

¹⁶⁵ Schell and Delury, *Wealth and Power*, 201.

¹⁶⁶ Barbara Mittler, “‘Enjoying the Four Olds!’ Oral Histories from a ‘Cultural Desert,’ *The Journal of Transcultural Studies* 4, no. 1 (2013): 177. <https://doi.org/10.11588/ts.2013.1.10798>

shorthand for denouncing moderates.¹⁶⁷ However, by the end of Mao's tenure, he failed to sustain the growth his rule had ignited, and China had not reached the level of strength its leaders had anticipated.

After Mao's death, Deng Xiaoping — once condemned by Mao as a “capitalist roader”¹⁶⁸ — restored public confidence in the government, appealing to a population exhausted by constant revolution and persistent poverty with his proclamation to “let some people get rich first.”¹⁶⁹ Under Deng, the CCP began to reexamine and rehabilitate China’s cultural heritage. Once dismissed by revolutionary fervor, Confucianism reemerged as a pillar of patriotism, with the state actively promoting China’s ancient history as a cornerstone and conduit for modern achievement. This cultural revival reached a new height during the 2008 Olympics. The Opening Ceremony did not only celebrate China’s historical legacy: it also streamlined a tumultuous past marked by wars, civil strife, and cycles of fragmentation and reunification. By invoking Confucian ideals, the ceremony glossed over China’s periods of chaos and created a seamless narrative of stability.

Leading up to 2008, a “national studies” fever swept across the country, renewing focus on Chinese cultural inheritance and Confucianism within academia.¹⁷⁰ As China entered an era of unprecedented economic prosperity, observers noted similarities with the East Asian “Little Dragons” — South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan — which shared China’s social conservatism and Confucian influences. All had attained wealth and power without adopting democracy, reinforcing the viability of the CCP’s model.

¹⁶⁷ Westad and Chen, *The Great Transformation*, 119.

¹⁶⁸ Westad and Chen, *The Great Transformation*, 109.

¹⁶⁹ Zhang Xiaodan, “Creating Wealth and Poverty in Postsocialist China,” ed. Deborah S. Davis and Wang Feng (Stanford University Press, 2009): xiv.

¹⁷⁰ Delury; Sheila Melvin, “Modern Gloss on China’s Golden Age,” *New York Times*. September 3, 2007. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/03/arts/03stud.html>

However, China's turn toward traditionalism initially faced resistance. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, censorship was less restrictive, and the public made critiques of the government during the 1978 Democracy Wall Movement, marking the onset of the so-called "Beijing Spring."¹⁷¹ Delury contends that after the 1989 massacre at Tiananmen Square, the state leveraged Confucianism to reinforce patriarchal governance and legitimize conservative policies.¹⁷² Deng sought to distinguish economic liberalization from social liberalization, fearing the latter could destabilize China's newfound prosperity.¹⁷³ China's economic system was not capitalism, Deng claimed, but "socialism with Chinese characteristics," using Chinese cultural exceptionalism to justify his opposition to western democracy.¹⁷⁴ After 1989, Confucian studies institutions proliferated, and by the 1990s, the CCP invoked Confucian ideals to "define the substance of 'Chinese characteristics.'"¹⁷⁵ Only four months after the Tiananmen massacre, Deng gave a speech at a government-sponsored celebration of Confucius's birthday in which he championed the sage's ideal of "harmony."¹⁷⁶ Later, in 2002, Chairman Jiang Zemin gave his final address to the National People's Congress, declaring that China had become a "society of moderate prosperity," borrowing from the language of Confucius's *Classic of Rites*. Delury claims this declaration was a conveyance of the "increasing heterogeneity of the sources of CCP ideology," which had by then embraced state-controlled capitalism, papering over the country's newly adopted economic policy with ancient aphorisms.¹⁷⁷ Six years later, the Opening

¹⁷¹ Delury, "'Harmonious' in China"; David C. Turnley, Peter Liu, Peter Turnley, and Melinda Liu, *Beijing Spring* (Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1989); 19.

¹⁷² Delury, "'Harmonious' in China"; Westad and Chen, *The Great Transformation*, 303.

¹⁷³ Delury, "'Harmonious' in China"; Westad and Chen, *The Great Transformation*, 303.

¹⁷⁴ Hagström, "Harmony and the Quest for Soft Power," 510.

¹⁷⁵ Delury, "'Harmonious' in China."

¹⁷⁶ Delury, "'Harmonious' in China."

¹⁷⁷ Delury has an interesting reading of this term, "moderate prosperity" (*xiaokang shehui* 小康社会). He claims that Jiang's usage of the term "actually undermined the Confucian ideal even as the CCP seemed to be moving in a neo-Confucian direction (by using a classical buzzword)" since it had been originally used to describe "the unjust, imperfect world Confucius saw around him" which he compared to "the utopian vision of 'great unity' (*datong* 大同), in which rulers and ruled worked together to achieve a shared concept of the common good." This vision of "great unity" had adherents from all fronts of Chinese reformism, including in Sino-Marxism. Thus,

Ceremony syncretized symbols from ancient, imperial, and modern China to present a vision of modernity “with Chinese characteristics” — a version of development that is China’s own, circumventing accusations of westernization.

While nationalist politicians initially dismissed Confucianism as antithetical to their goals, they later retooled it to reinforce state power. Though Confucianism had once seemed at odds with industrial progress, the state realized the ideology’s utility in filibustering social reform. Moreover, to borrow sociologist Anthony Smith’s terminology, the CCP employs Confucianism as a tool of *ethnosymbolism*, using shared cultural symbols, myths, and traditions to forge a collective national identity.¹⁷⁸ Pro-democracy dissident Liu Xiaobo once remarked that the Confucianism promoted by the state gained acceptance because “the Chinese search for a spiritual crutch in the ancient culture that once made them proud.”¹⁷⁹ Confucianism — or at least its curated representation — became crucial in shaping national identity after Mao’s cultural rupture.

Though the 2008 Opening Ceremony omitted Maoism, its exclusion was unsurprising — how could a project of cultural formation reference a historical period defined by cultural destruction? By erasing ruptures, Zhang constructed a narrative of an unbroken 5,000-year civilization. In doing so, he aimed to restore both his reputation and that of his people — a people encouraged to champion China’s cultural distinctions from its neighbors and competitors, even if such distinctions were, at least in part, manufactured.

concludes Delury, this was an affirmation of the neoliberal capitalist measures put forward by Deng’s reforms, telegraphing that “the CCP was no longer the party of utopian ‘great unity’ à la the Great Leap Forward and Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. It would pursue the more modest goal of moderate prosperity, and people were free to pursue their self-interests.” Delury, “‘Harmonious’ in China.”

¹⁷⁸ Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism* (Routledge, 1998): 170.

¹⁷⁹ Geremie Barmé and Linda Jaivin, *New Ghosts, Old Dreams: Chinese Rebel Voices*, (Times Books, 1992): 385.

One World, One Dream

By the time Hu Jintao took office, the failures of his predecessor's vision for a society of "moderate prosperity" were apparent. With China's unchecked economic growth, the national wealth disparity increased, as did the number of reported local protests. Until the government stopped releasing annual statistics in 2006, there were up to tens of thousands of such protests reported every year.¹⁸⁰ Experts estimate that by the end of Hu's term in 2013, the number of protests was close to 200,000.¹⁸¹ As Delury notes, "Party documents dealing with harmony openly acknowledge the discord caused by increasing disparities between rich and poor and city and countryside."¹⁸² In 2004, as a direct response to popular demonstrations, Hu implemented policies meant to create a "harmonious society" and a "harmonious world," asserting that "harmony carries the most meaning for Chinese culture."¹⁸³ "Harmony" was both shorthand for Chinese cultural and philosophical tradition and an essential component to the CCP's project of modernization and national rebranding.¹⁸⁴

Integrating Confucianism into Hu's agenda, however, required maneuvering. Liu Xiaobo saw Hu's Confucianism as "a sales pitch that combines tall tales about the ancients with insights that are about as sophisticated as the lyrics of pop songs."¹⁸⁵ Delury analyzes a segment of Hu's speech announcing his doctrine, in which Hu misattributed the maxim "harmony is prized above all" to Confucius; this quote came from one of the sage's disciples, who maintained that harmony

¹⁸⁰ William Freeman, "The Accuracy of China's 'Mass Incidents,'" *Financial Times*, March 2, 2010.

¹⁸¹ Thomas Orlik, "Unrest Grows as Economy Booms," *Wall Street Journal*, September 26, 2011.

¹⁸² Delury, "'Harmonious' in China."

¹⁸³ Hu Jintao, "Build towards a Harmonious World of Lasting Peace and Common Prosperity," "*Guanyu Goujian Shehuizhuyi Hexie Shehui Jianghua Quanwen*" ("关于构建社会主义和谐社会的讲话 (全文)"), *Chinanet*, 2005; Josh Chin, "The Most 'Chinese' Chinese Character?" *Wall Street Journal*, October 15, 2010.

¹⁸⁴ Zeng Xiangming, "Interpreting the Soft Power of the 'Chinese Dream,'" "*Zhongguomeng De Ruanshili Jiedu*," ("解读“中国梦”的软实力"), Fujian Theory Studies 8 (2014): 4–6; Tao Shaoxing "Deconstructing 'China Threat Theory': The Pursuit of Harmonious World in the Chinese Dream," *Journal of Nanchang Hangkong University: Social Sciences* 17, no. 1 (2015): 19.

¹⁸⁵ Barmé and Jaivin, *New Ghosts, Old Dreams*, 385.

must be balanced with “a sense of ritual propriety.”¹⁸⁶ In the same speech, Delury notes that Hu cherry-picked quotes from various ancient texts, including one from the *Classic of Rites* — “all men are brothers within the four seas”— which, according to Delury, strips “Confucianism of its core familial and particularist ethics.”¹⁸⁷ Notably, performers at the 2008 Opening Ceremony also recited this quote. Delury says that, in deploying ancient thinkers and texts to bolster his political agenda, Hu “ignored the subtlety and tension in classical arguments over the term’s significance, presenting instead a generic picture of sages ancient and modern, Eastern and Western, all agreeing that everyone should get along with one another.”¹⁸⁸ While Confucian thought has historically embraced syncretism, Hu ultimately failed to articulate a coherent model for his ideal society. Instead of formulating a new, nuanced ideology, he reduced harmony to a tool for encouraging assimilation and political obsequiousness — a stark contrast to Confucius’s original vision of the virtue.

Hu’s “Harmonious Society” doctrine encompassed a series of reforms and policies aimed at sustaining the state-controlled, market-driven growth introduced by Deng with an emphasis on developing rural areas to narrow the wealth gap.¹⁸⁹ It also instituted policies that responded to social unrest in China, which surged at its border with Tibet.¹⁹⁰ In 2005, Hu’s administration drafted laws tightening control on speech about the government, limiting the activities of NGOs, and censoring internet discourse.¹⁹¹ The same year, the slogan for the upcoming Olympics was

¹⁸⁶ Delury, “‘Harmonious’ in China.”

¹⁸⁷ Delury, “‘Harmonious’ in China.”

¹⁸⁸ Delury, “‘Harmonious’ in China.”

¹⁸⁹ Maureen Fan, “China’s Party Leadership Declares New Priority: ‘Harmonious Society,’ ” *The Washington Post*, October 12, 2006.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2006/10/12/chinas-party-leadership-declares-new-priority-harmonious-society-span-classbankheaddoctrine-proposed-by-president-hu-formally-endorsedspan/0dea45bb-b120-4ab7-8b34-e867d308ae4b/>

¹⁹⁰ Fan, “China’s Party Leadership Declares New Priority”; Roger Barnett “Thunder from Tibet,” *New York Review of Books*, May 1, 2008. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2008/05/29/thunder-from-tibet/>

¹⁹¹ Fan, “China’s Party Leadership Declares New Priority.”

unveiled: “One World, One Dream,” a seemingly benign platitude that gestured at Hu’s attempt to “harmonize” his increasingly fractured country.¹⁹² Hagström theorizes that “harmony” played a crucial role in enhancing China’s appeal to international visitors during the Olympics.¹⁹³ Claims to harmony are, Hagström says, “made in attempts to attract domestic and international audiences,” and “by portraying itself as harmonious, Chinese leaders thus seek to convey China’s overall benignity to the world and to attract domestic and international audiences.”¹⁹⁴ This view assumes that the ceremony’s goal was to communicate harmony, but the ceremony did not merely signal unity — it also generated a shared affective experience. In this sense, the ceremony was not just a representation of “harmony” but a performance that sought to produce it as lived reality.

¹⁹² IOC, “Beijing 2008: One World, One Dream,” June 27, 2005.
<https://olympics.com/ioc/news/beijing-2008-one-world-one-dream>

¹⁹³ Schneider examines several instances in the ceremony that, in his view, illustrate China’s appeals to harmony as “discursive statements about how humanity should strive for world peace.” As part of China’s demonstration of its commitment to peace, the ceremony featured symbolic elements such as “white doves, foreign performers alongside Chinese actors, images of foreign children,” and a large inflatable globe in the final segment. Atop this globe stood singers Sarah Brightman, an English performer, and Liu Huan, a Chinese singer, holding hands as they performed “You and Me” in both Mandarin and English: *“Come together; put your hand in mine. You and me, from one world, we are family.”* “来吧！朋友，伸出你的手，我和你，心连心，永远一家人。” Schneider, *Staging China*, 182-185.

¹⁹⁴ Hagström, “Harmony and the Quest for Soft Power,” 508.

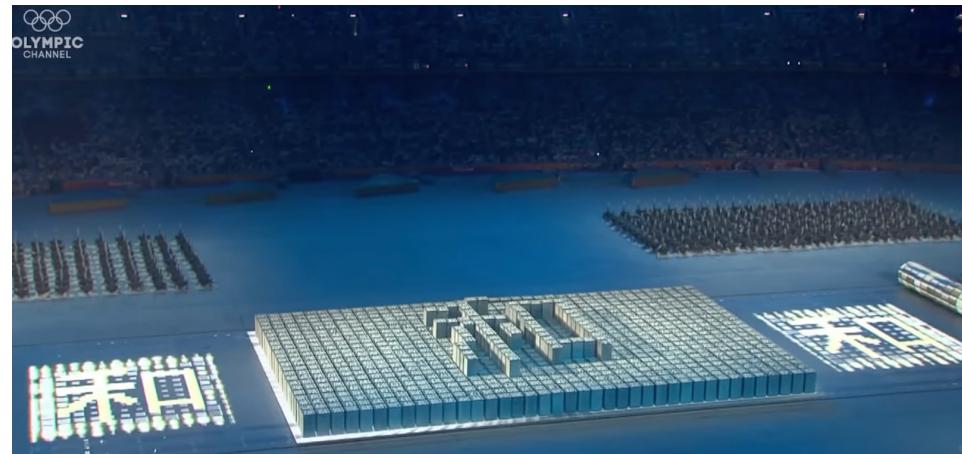
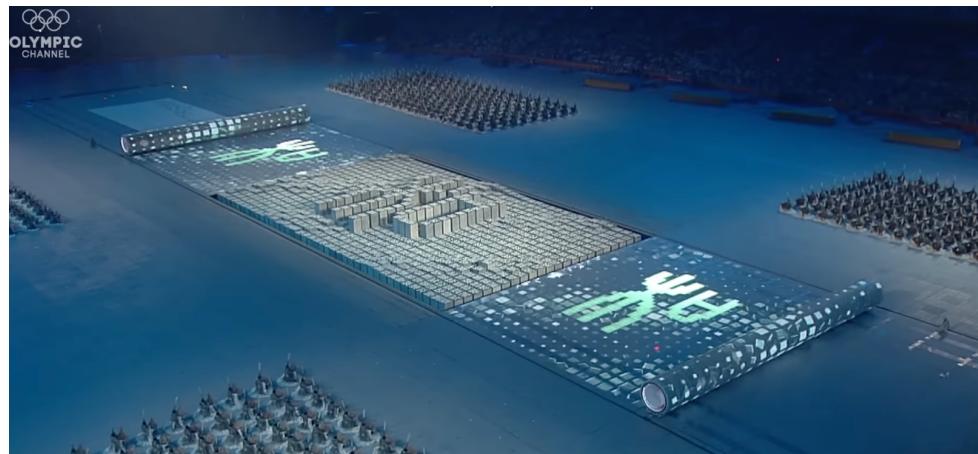


Figure 10: The juxtaposition of the *he* (和) character's earlier form with its modern script. Olympics.

Figure 11: The Confucian disciples. Olympics.



We may see the visual performance of the state's reimagined Confucianism through cues in the movable type act. It began with Confucian disciples in black-and-white robes, reminiscent of anthropomorphized ink brushes like the dancers in the preceding paper act. Like the drummers, the disciples chanted and moved in synchronization, using bound bamboo rods as their percussive instruments. Unlike the drummers, however, the disciples' movements were restricted by their gowns and rods. They spun, marched, and bowed to the large screen at the center of the floor, where a movable typeset had risen in place of the giant paper scroll. The typeset moved in mesmerizing waves, foreshadowing the seafaring Zheng He compass act. From the typeset emerged the first formation of the character for harmony, almost unrecognizable in its ancient script.

The disciples continued their chant, arms raised toward the typeset as if addressing a master with their prayer-like proclamations. Ripples emerged from within the press, expanding outward from a single point. The circular ripples gradually transformed into concentric rectangles, forming convex and concave pyramids — perhaps in an allusion to the ancient pyramids, another monumental feat of engineering, precision, and intense labor. The interplay of circles and rectangles is similarly symbolic: In ancient China, the square represents earth, and the circle represents Heaven. These two forms are united by the movement of the type blocks, harmonized by the humans that power them.¹⁹⁵

As the performance continued, a second early Chinese character for harmony appeared, followed by its most modern version. The Opening Ceremony's presentation of the character's

¹⁹⁵ Humans are also often seen as the link between heaven and earth: "For at bottom Heaven, Earth, the myriad things and man form one body. The point at which this unity is manifested in its most refined and excellent form is the clear intelligence of the human mind." Wang Yangming, *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings*, trans. by Wing-tsit Chan (Columbia University Press, 1963), 221-222. <https://archive.org/details/instructionsforp00wang/page/n7/mode/2up>

linguistic development aligns with how the ceremony presented history itself: mythic yet true, shape-shifting yet orderly. Harmony, too, would seem to have a 5,000-year history. The lights cut out before an angular, raised gash grew out of the press, invoking the Great Wall — China’s own Pyramids of Giza. Bright pink plum blossoms emerged from the blocks of type, swaying before the performers themselves appeared. While the audience enjoyed a flawlessly coordinated performance, each dancer was only aware of the precise moment to lift their small box, unable to see the pictures they created. As the performers smiled and waved to the crowd, their drenched faces and fatigued expressions divulged months of grueling practice and tireless work to harmonize movement from those dark, confined cells.

If Zhang’s movies from the 1990s made him well-known, the 2008 Opening Ceremony made him a true star. After the Games were over, Zhang won a Peabody Award “for creating a spell-binding, unforgettable celebration of the Olympic promise, featuring a cast of thousands.”¹⁹⁶ He was a runner-up for *Time*’s Person of the Year. Steven Spielberg, who once considered joining the team of creative directors for the Beijing Olympic ceremonies, described Zhang’s work in *Time*: “This year he captured this prevalent theme of harmony and peace, which is the spirit of the Olympic Games,” building on what Spielberg called the “desire for inner peace” that he believed permeated Zhang’s oeuvre.¹⁹⁷ Harmony, it turned out, was a fantastic selling point.

¹⁹⁶ 68th Annual Peabody Awards, May 2009.

<http://www.peabodyawards.com/award-profile/beijing-olympics-opening-ceremony-and-zhang-yimou>

¹⁹⁷ “Person Of The Year 2008,” *Time*, December 17, 2008.

https://web.archive.org/web/20081219174746/http://www.time.com/time/specials/2008/personoftheyear/article/0,31682,1861543_1865103_1865107,00.html

Being Harmonized

Just as there are material benefits to harmonious nationalism, there are also material costs. Less than five months before the Olympics, Chinese officials were dealing with civil unrest on the western border. March 10, 2008, marked the 49th anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan uprising which led to the exile of the 14th Dalai Lama, who released a statement commemorating the event:

China is emerging as a powerful country due to her great economic progress. This is to be welcomed but... the world is eagerly waiting to see how the present Chinese leadership will put into effect its avowed concepts of 'harmonious society' and 'peaceful rise.' For the realization of these concepts, economic progress alone will not suffice...¹⁹⁸

That day, hundreds of Tibetan monks marched from Drepung Monastery to Lhasa in peaceful protest against the PLA's targeted imprisonment of Tibetan dissidents and restrictions on their cultural and religious practices.¹⁹⁹ Chinese security responded with force.²⁰⁰

The 2008 uprising would become one of the bloodiest in recent Chinese history, escalating into a days-long conflict with civilian protestors in Lhasa targeting Han and Hui (Muslim) Chinese business owners.²⁰¹ The protestors hoped staging a conflict so close to the Olympics would draw international attention, and they were right.²⁰² The uprising fueled western fears about the consequences of authoritarian rule in China. International organizations, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, called for the boycott of the Opening

¹⁹⁸ Barnett, "Thunder from Tibet"; "Lhasa under Siege," *The Economist*, March 17, 2008. <https://www.economist.com/asia/2008/03/17/lhasa-under-siege>

¹⁹⁹ Donald S. Lopez, "How to Think About Tibet" in *China in 2008: A Year of Great Significance*, ed. Merkel-Hess, Kate, et al., 42; it is also important to note that there were significant demonstrations prior to March 10, though this day holds particular international significance.

²⁰⁰ Lopez, "How to Think About Tibet," 42.

²⁰¹ Merkel-Hess, et al., *China in 2008*, 39.

²⁰² Lopez, "How to Think About Tibet," 42.

Ceremony.²⁰³ Meanwhile, Chinese citizens were outraged by videos of attacks against Chinese settlers in Tibet that circulated online.²⁰⁴

China's vision of "one world" came at the cost of Tibetan sovereignty and, on another level, the recognition of ethnic differences. Controversy erupted when the organizers of the Games confirmed allegations that the Olympic flag-raising troupe of 56 children — one for every recognized Chinese ethnic minority, each dressed in the corresponding traditional attire — were all, in fact, Han Chinese.²⁰⁵ Wang Wei, the vice president of the Games, defended the decision, explaining that "it is typical for Chinese performers to wear different apparel from different ethnic groups," to symbolize how they are "friendly and happy together."²⁰⁶ The inclusion of colorful garments is supposedly sufficient for minority representation because the state fails to publicly recognize cultural differences between China's ethnic minorities and the Han majority. Symbolically, Han identity is made universal. Indeed, Han has always been a fluid category, evolving with the growth of the Chinese state and cannibalizing other ethnicities in the process.²⁰⁷ Characterizing assimilation as "harmony" allows the state to paint dissidents, including Tibetan protesters, as enemies of harmony and progress. While international support for Tibet surged in 2008, Chinese nationalism was only reaffirmed by the uprising domestically. In his essay "At War with the Utopia of Modernity," Pankaj Mishra explains that "a largely Han nation sympathized with the Han Chinese who had been attacked by Tibetan mobs."²⁰⁸

²⁰³ Allison Welch, "Human Rights in China: 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics," *Human Rights & Human Welfare* 9, no. 1 (2009): 210.

²⁰⁴ Merkel-Hess, et al., *China in 2008*, 39.

²⁰⁵ Belinda Goldsmith, "Ethnic children faked at Games opening," *Reuters*, August 15, 2008.

²⁰⁶ Goldsmith, "Ethnic children faked at Games opening."

²⁰⁷ For example, the Minyue people were gradually subsumed into the Han majority during the process of cultural and political integration in the early imperial periods, particularly under the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE). However, it's worth noting that "ethnicity," similarly to "race," is generally a slippery category that defies rigid delineation as it is constantly socially constructed. See: Yang Kuan (杨宽), *Zhanguo shi* (战国史) (Shanghai People's Press, July 2016).

²⁰⁸ Merkel-Hess, Kate, et al., *China in 2008*, 39.



Figure 12: The parade of China’s recognized ethnic minorities. Olympics.

The 2008 Games have thus been described as a mass distraction from the Tibetan Uprising. Florian Schneider argues that the Games were “a modern-day version of the infamous Roman imperial practice of providing the subjugated masses with bread and games.”²⁰⁹ Academic Haiyan Lee agrees, adding that it is “better to party en masse than to flex massive military muscles.”²¹⁰ However, the ceremony did not simply serve as a distraction — it also provided the perfect platform to reinforce and project a Han Chinese-centric state narrative. Beyond the half-hearted attempt at minority representation during the flag-raising, the Opening Ceremony made few references to China’s diverse influences. The ceremony’s historical narrative illustrated the development of imperial China without reference to the two major dynasties led by non-Han ethnic minorities²¹¹ and offered few symbols of Tibetan culture. There were no obvious Buddhist symbols, despite Buddhism’s significant influence on Chinese culture.

²⁰⁹ Schneider, *Staging China*, 23.

²¹⁰ Haiyan Lee, “It’s Right to Party, En Masse,” in *China in 2008: A Year of Great Significance*, ed. Merkel-Hess, et al., 176.

²¹¹ That is, the Yuan and the Qing.



Figure 13: Four activists from Students for a Free Tibet unfurled a banner spelling out “Free Tibet” in Beijing’s Olympic Park. The activists were eventually detained by security personnel. Wikimedia; Associated Press, “[China Detains Activists after Unfurling ‘Free Tibet’ Banner](#),” Fox News, January 14, 2015.

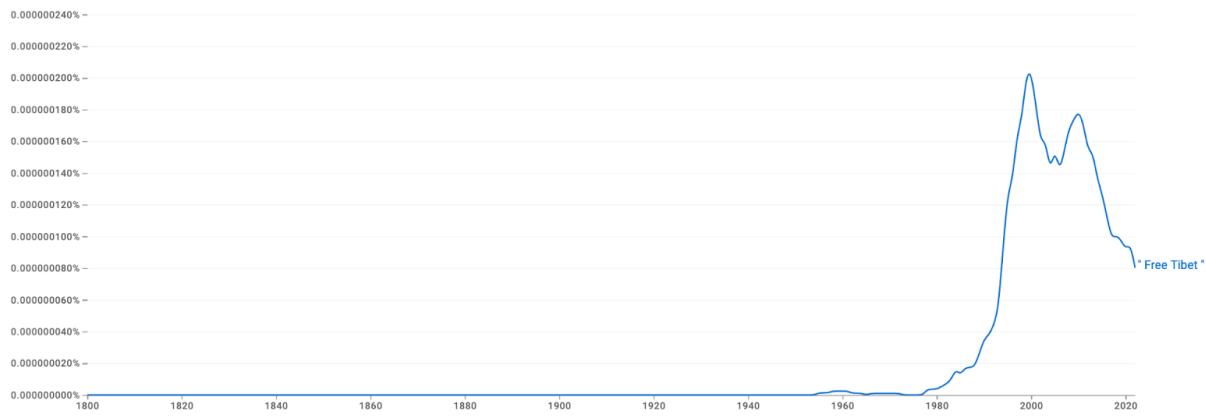


Figure 14: Google Ngram result for “Free Tibet” displays a peak in mentions in 2008 and a sharp decline after 2009.

After the wave of Tibetan protests subsided and the Games were over, news cycles shifted focus, and the issue of Tibetan independence faded from international attention.²¹² However, preparation for the Games included the installation of surveillance cameras and monitoring devices in Tibet and Beijing which remained in place even after the Games, creating

²¹² In hindsight, Chinese media has been remarkably successful in silencing claims for Tibetan recognition. There is little coverage of the Tibetan protests that occurred outside the Bird’s Nest Olympic stadium during the Games or the “Tibetan Olympics” that activist Lobsang Wangyal staged in Dharamshala in May of 2008. See: “One World Many Dreams, Tibetan Olympics to begin from May 22.” *gangkyi.com*. May 16, 2008. https://web.archive.org/web/20110711072052/http://gangkyi.com/news_detail.php?id=493

a “lasting mechanism” of control, as described by China’s minister of public security.²¹³ Western protests over China’s treatment of Tibetan protestors only fueled Han ethnonationalism as Chinese nationals grew increasingly indignant about the confrontations they faced during the torch relay.²¹⁴ Hagström argues that Confucian soft power fosters a “self/other dichotomization” that strengthens Chinese nationalism by positioning it in opposition to the non-Confucian west.²¹⁵ Western sympathy for Tibet reinforced a “self/other dichotomization” not only between Chinese people and westerners but also between Han Chinese and Tibetans, only compounded by the anger many Chinese civilians felt over the violence Tibetan protesters inflicted upon individual Chinese settlers.

Of course, unrest in Tibet did not begin or end in 2008. China has long had territorial conflicts with Tibet, which is rich in precious minerals. Tensions escalated significantly in 2006 when the Chinese government built a railroad bringing thousands of Chinese settlers into Lhasa.²¹⁶ This new railroad expedited industrial development in Tibet but also displaced its people, quickly drawing accusations of settler colonialism.²¹⁷ While defenders of the CCP point to the economic benefits Tibet has received from Chinese intervention, critics argue that Tibet’s development is precisely what has fueled discontent in the region.²¹⁸ Mishra writes that “Deng

²¹³ Schell and Delury, *Wealth and Power*, 376; Joseph Fewsmith, “‘Social management’ as a Way of Coping with Heightened Social Tensions,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no.36 (January 26, 2012), 6.

²¹⁴ “During the initial torch lighting ceremony in Athens, two members of Reporters Without Borders rushed the stadium field, waving black flags. For the torch, this marked the beginning of a tumultuous journey. In San Francisco, London, and Paris, police officers created a ‘human shield’ around the torch to protect it from thousands of protesters. Despite this, the torch was momentarily extinguished by protesters in both London and Paris. The planned route through Pakistan was altered due to fear of militant interference. Protests surrounding the torch’s journey were also reported in Kazakhstan, Turkey, Argentina, India, Australia, Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam.” Welch, “Human Rights in China,” 212-213.

²¹⁵ Hagström, “Harmony and the Quest for Soft Power,” 518.

²¹⁶ Mishra, “At War with the Utopia of Modernity,” 40.

²¹⁷ Mishra, “At War with the Utopia of Modernity,” 40.

²¹⁸ “Beijing hopes that the new rail link to Lhasa, which makes possible the cheap extraction of Tibet’s uranium and copper, will bring about *kuayueshi fazhan* [跨越式发展] (‘leapfrog development’)… Tibet has been enlisted into what is the biggest and swiftest modernization in history: China’s development on the model of consumer capitalism.” Mishra, “At War with the Utopia of Modernity,” 40.

Xiaoping's post-Tiananmen gamble — that people intoxicated with prosperity will not demand political change — failed in Tibet.” He attributes this failure to the rural living conditions in much of Tibet: Tibetans were not accustomed to, nor did they generally support, urbanization. Andrew Martin Fischer argues that the CCP’s development of Tibet has come at the expense of Tibetan empowerment, noting that the region’s uneven growth primarily benefits Han Chinese developers.²¹⁹ Historian Ravni Thakur states the socioeconomic divide between Han developers and indigenous Tibetans is “corroborated by any visit to Tibet where it is noticeable how the Han dominate all urban sectors.”²²⁰

However, urbanization and industrialization were highly successful in promoting nationalism in China’s Han-dominant regions. Scholar Annisa Lee traces modern Han Chinese nationalism to Deng’s 1978 economic reforms. “Chinese ethnic nationalism and pride,” she writes, “was buoyed by the New China’s rapid economic democratic growth, military modernization, cultural and educational development and forming of new collectivism and unity.”²²¹ In contrast, widespread skepticism about modernization in Tibet, as Mishra argues, led to the failure of the “belief in the utopia of modernity — a consumer lifestyle in urban centers — promised by China.”²²² Fischer notes that many Tibetans rejected the state’s forced Sinization, even though it brought financial benefits, improved education, and increased white-collar work opportunities.²²³ Many Tibetans were unconvinced that a higher GDP would lead to the general improvement of life. As Fischer notes, China’s economic integration of Tibet entailed increased

²¹⁹ Fischer, *The Disempowered Development of Tibet in China*, 11.

²²⁰ Ravni Thakur, “The Marginalization of Tibetans in Tibet: Rethinking the Development Story.” *Development and Change* 47, no.1 (2016): 203–17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12214>.

²²¹ Annisa Lai Lee, “Did the Olympics Help the Nation Branding of China? Comparing Public Perception of China with the Olympics before and after the 2008 Beijing Olympics in Hong Kong,” *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 6, no. 3 (2010): 209.

²²² Mishra, “At War with the Utopia of Modernity,” 41.

²²³ Fischer, *The Disempowered Development of Tibet in China*, 251.

marginalization, which strengthened political resistance.²²⁴ The 2008 Tibetan uprising can thus be understood as an anti-capitalist struggle as well as an ethnic conflict.

Mishra provocatively contends that “Tibetans are not much more politically important than the hundreds of hapless Chinese uprooted by China’s Faustian pact with consumer capitalism.”²²⁵ Indeed, many Han Chinese citizens are also affected by the state’s prioritization of industry and infrastructure. In 2008, the BOCOG admitted that at least 15,000 Beijing residents were displaced in the construction of the Olympic infrastructure. However, the Forced Migration Review estimates the number to be as high as 1.25 million, making 2008 one of the most devastating Games in terms of housing displacement.²²⁶

Mishra points out that similar conflicts exist in democratic nations as well, drawing comparisons with struggles in his home country of India. He writes that farmers and tribal members in West Bengal and Odisha “confront a murderous axis of politicians, businessmen, and militias determined to corral their ancestral lands into a global network of profit.”²²⁷ A similar comparison can be made with the historic and ongoing struggles of Indigenous peoples in the Americas. Again, Hu’s emphasis on harmony did not emerge from protests for democracy or ethnic recognition but as a response to “discord caused by increasing disparities between rich and poor and city and countryside.”²²⁸ Scholars have noted similar patterns in Xinjiang: ethnographer Thomas Cliff refers to the political situation in Xinjiang as “lucrative chaos,” where Uyghur land

²²⁴ Fischer, *The Disempowered Development of Tibet in China*, 11.

²²⁵ Mishra, “At War with the Utopia of Modernity,” 41.

²²⁶ Nick Mulvenney, “Beijing says 15,000 relocated for Games venues,” *Reuters*. February 19, 2008.

²²⁷ Mishra, “At War with the Utopia of Modernity,” 41.

²²⁸ Delury, “‘Harmonious’ in China.”

dispossession and debt growth result from the collaboration between Chinese government officials and entrepreneurs.²²⁹

In this context, one might view conventional coverage of the 2008 Tibetan uprising as a distraction in its own right. By framing the conflict as primarily ethnic, the media obscured the shared experiences of exploitation and dispossession faced by both Tibetans and Han Chinese, undermining potential cross-ethnic solidarity. Schell and Delury claim that “the biggest new battlefield in Hu Jintao’s campaign to impose harmony on an increasingly outspoken and freewheeling society was online.”²³⁰ Hu’s “Great Firewall” censored websites and posts that did not align with party ideology. Chinese netizens who found themselves on the wrong side of the firewall coined the term *bei hexie* (被和谐), “being harmonized,” to describe the state’s virtual suppression.²³¹

Enforcing the “self/other dichotomization” enabled China to refer to military personnel deployed in Xinjiang as “harmony makers” while vilifying advocates for Tibetan independence, such as the Dalai Lama and Liu Xiaobo, as “disharmonious.”²³² This framework positioned Han Chinese as the “self” and “disharmonious” ethnic minorities as the “other,” creating a logic that allowed Han Chinese people to wear the clothing of Tibetans and Uyghurs because of an assumed “sameness” within the nation, while on the other hand confirming that Tibetans and

²²⁹ Tim Summers, “Ethnic conflict and protest in Tibet and Xinjiang: Unrest in China’s west and China’s frontier regions: ethnicity, economic integration and foreign relations,” *International Affairs* 93, no. 3 (May 2017): 754.

²³⁰ Schell and Delury, *Wealth and Power*, 376.

²³¹ Schell and Delury, *Wealth and Power*, 377.

²³² “Thousands of Harmony Makers Sent to Urumqi Communities While Authorities Vow Harsh Punishment against Syringe Attackers” *Xinhua*, September 6, 2009. http://tr.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zt/xjzzq/200909/t20090907_1431801.htm ; Embassy of the PRC to the USA “Chinese Embassy Spokesman Wang Baodong: Don’t Politicize the Nobel Peace Prize,” *USA Today*, December 10, 2010.

Uyghurs were bellicose and fundamentally different, thus requiring forced assimilation and suppression under Hu’s “Harmonious Society” doctrine.

Harmony, as defined by the state, involves alignment with China’s “rags to riches” Cinderella story. Popular investment in this vision encourages allegiance to the state’s agenda of wealth creation. Recall Zhang Lijia’s interviewee who said, “We were called the ‘sick man of Asia.’ Now we are strong and rich enough to hold such a major international event.”²³³ Hu’s framework for a “harmonious society” makes economic development a source of national pride, positioning state-led economic progress as both a justification for and a means of securing public allegiance. Those who challenge this narrative, particularly ethnic minorities, are labeled as outsiders and disruptors.

Zhang Yimou witnessed China’s awe-inspiring economic transformation firsthand. In many ways, the trajectory of his life mirrored his country’s rapid growth. At the beginning of his career, he sold a pint of his blood to afford his first camera, and his first films explored the harsh realities of poverty. Now, a multimillionaire and China’s most famous director, Zhang creates films about martial glory and imperial grandeur. But nothing Zhang or any future Opening Ceremony director would do could compare to 2008.

The 2008 ceremonies concluded abruptly for Zhang. The thousands of people who had worked with him for months, if not years, boarded planes the very next day. What had begun with such ostentation ended with little fanfare. “All of a sudden, all the people were gone, and the building was empty,” Zhang recalled. “A sense of being neglected arose. When I woke up the following day, I found that the Olympic Games had gone away.”²³⁴ By morning, a project that

²³³ Zhang Lijia, “Hand Grenades and the Olympics,” 168.

²³⁴ Long Wei and Bei Ke, *Zhang Yimou: From a Man of Northwest China to the Chief Director of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games* (China Pictorial Publishing House, 2009), 251.

had consumed seven years of Zhang's life was over. The thousands of unnamed people who had contributed to that "brilliant bloom" — now no longer Zhang's human machinery — quietly returned to their lives, unnoticed. It was as if it had all been nothing more than a dream.

CONCLUSION: What Does China's Future Hold?

In 2008, modern Chinese methods were disguised as tradition. As robed drummers quoted *The Analects*, a casual observer might not realize that the Confucianism the CCP endorsed was, in some ways, newer than the LED technology the *fou* drum models were outfitted with. The kind of mass spectacle Zhang employed to depict ancient China's splendor was a product of the Industrial Age and refined during the Cultural Revolution. Yet it is often not China's past but its future that the west is concerned with. "China is the future" is a dictum one will hear repeated in conversations, op-eds, and economic forecasts. Recall Ebert's cautionary remark: "Today, from a standing start, China has the world's third-largest economy. We are first, but sinking. They're rising." The Opening Ceremony's appeals to the past were ultimately grand gestures toward its utopian vision of the future.

As Beijing prepared for the 2008 Games, discourse about China's future — and the means China would take to achieve it — gave rise to the term "Sinofuturism," often attributed to musician and theorist Steve Goodman. He described Sinofuturism as a "darkside cartography of the turbulent rise of East Asia" that grafts "seemingly heterogeneous elements" onto "the topology of planetary capitalism."²³⁵ This framework offers a valuable lens for understanding China's self-presentation in the 2008 Opening Ceremony, as well as its broader vision for modernity. Sinofuturism is more than just an aesthetic — it is a mechanism through which the CCP projects China as a formidable global power while simultaneously invoking a civilizational tradition rooted in Confucianism. This tradition, as discussed in Chapter Two, has been reshaped over the past century to align with state ideology. The 2008 Beijing Opening Ceremony was, in

²³⁵ Steve Goodman "Fei ch'ien Rinse Out: Sino-futurist Undercurrency," *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 7 (1998): 155.

essence, a time capsule of China’s projected future. Nearly two decades later, we can assess how accurate those projections were, examining how China’s present is shaped by the ideological visions and economic policies of the 2000s.

Almost a decade after the 2008 Opening Ceremony, artist Lawrence Lek expanded on the concept of Sinofuturism in a video essay he calls its “retroactive manifesto.”²³⁶ Sinofuturism is not an identity claimed by the Chinese state but a term used by critics, making Lek’s perspective particularly notable — his manifesto is one of the most optimistic interpretations of Sinofuturism, or at least one that is not straightforwardly critical of the CCP’s ambitions. In *Sinofuturism*, Lek adopts the perspective of the state itself, assessing Chinese stereotypes based on their alignment with state priorities. Lek states:

Whether Chinese Olympic athletes are branded as ‘robots,’ or Chinese students or tourists are likened to ‘swarms,’ or Shenzhen factory workers are criticised for ‘flooding the marketplace,’ the subtext is the same. It is the dehumanisation of the individual into a nameless, faceless mass.²³⁷

Rather than rejecting such characterizations, Lek argues that Sinofuturism embraces them. To answer critiques of Chinese Olympic athletes and Shenzhen factory workers, Lek’s Sinofuturism leans into the cultural assumption that Confucian societies are driven by collectivism, spurred by a desire for social harmony. As discussed in Chapter Two, the “traditionalism” of Confucian values is complicated by China’s history of negotiation with Confucianism. However, the broader idea of collectivism can also be linked to communist ideology, creating a helpful paradigm in which both ancient and modern China are united by the same unifying principle.

²³⁶ Lawrence Lek, “Sinofuturism 中华未来主义,” *Sinofuturism.com*, 2016, video, 1 hour. <https://sinofuturism.com/>

²³⁷ Lek, “Sinofuturism 中华未来主义.”

This deliberate embrace of orientalist tropes reflects the cultural phenomenon of “techno-Orientalism,” a concept first introduced by Kevin Morley and David Robins.²³⁸ Techno-Orientalism, as the term implies, replaces traditional Orientalist stereotypes depicting Asia as culturally backward and technologically deficient with tropes that cast Asia as a mechanized hub of technological production, driven by hypercapitalist market forces and ulterior motives.²³⁹ It fuses colonial-era views of Asian bodies as coolie hordes with modern “model minority” myths that frame Asian minds as unfeeling, hyper-rational calculators. In many sci-fi narratives, Asians or Asian-coded figures appear as robots, aliens, or clones, and often en masse.²⁴⁰ Whether depicted as a looming force of global domination or as morally neutral automatons, these figures embody western anxieties that see East Asia’s rise as both inevitable and unsettling.

Yet, techno-Orientalism can serve the Chinese state’s rebranding efforts in how it fits within the cultural frameworks (primarily western) foreign nations already use to understand China. After all, it is easier to manipulate existing stereotypes than to dismantle them entirely. As Lek states, “Sinofuturism answers the Chinese problems of physical servitude, intellectual conformity, and computational OCD, by openly embracing Artificial Intelligence.” Instead of challenging stereotypes that portray Chinese people as an unthinking collective, Lek’s Sinofuturism simply dismisses the western idealization of individuality. Lek’s allegory defines individuals not as discrete entities but as nodes of a unified whole; artificial intelligence is a useful metaphor as it is better understood as a system or collective rather than a singular entity.²⁴¹

²³⁸ David Morley and Kevin Robins, *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries* (Routledge, 1995).

²³⁹ David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu, *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media* (Rutgers University Press, 2015), 1-19.

²⁴⁰ Michelle N. Huang, *Inhuman Figures*, Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, video, 23:53. <https://apa.si.edu/inhuman-figures/>

²⁴¹ “Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD) Artist Talk with Lawrence Lek,” posted by “Visual Arts Centre of Clarington,” YouTube video, 1:18:18, June 9, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=67rfO1VQjH0>

Lek's allegory is especially fitting because AI, like the 2008 Opening Ceremony, showcases the power of large-scale human labor — and China's ability to mobilize it. Though AI, much like the Mechanical Turk, is often perceived as autonomous, it ultimately relies on hidden human effort.²⁴² But the ceremony's movable type installation does not sustain the illusion of machine independence for long — it culminates in a reveal of its nearly 900 operators. The performance also draws a direct lineage between China's contemporary technological achievements and historical feats like the Great Wall, both framed as triumphs of collective labor. Sinofuturism aestheticizes the entanglement of human effort and machine progress, wrenching artifacts of the past to prefigure the future.



Figure 15: The Opening Ceremony's depiction of the Great Wall during the “movable type” act features a digital rendering of the wall at the edges of the large screen “scroll” framed by the type blocks. Olympics.

Jennifer Rhee writes extensively about the potential of such anti-humanist frameworks to capture the lived experiences of Asians laboring under the shadow of western hegemony. She asks:

Who is the human who is de facto valorized and normativized through the anthropomorphic visions that organize robotics? Who, in their purported incommensurability, unknowability, unfamiliarity, or illegibility within robotics'

²⁴² I invoke the Mechanical Turk because it is frequently referenced in contemporary discussions about AI to illustrate the gap between appearance and reality in machine intelligence.

narrow views of humanness, is excluded, erased, dehumanized, rendered not-human?²⁴³

For Rhee, anthropomorphic frameworks only perpetuate the colonial logic that historically subjugated non-white peoples. The first fish-gutting machine in America was nicknamed the “Iron Chink” — a stark reminder that, as Lisa Lowe argues, the Asian body has long been rendered illegible within western conceptions of humanity. Lowe points out that it was this dehumanization of the “other” that precipitated the economic conditions that allowed western nations to prosper and promote theories of “liberal humanism.”²⁴⁴

In their essay on ethnofuturisms, Merve Verlag, Armen Avanessian, and Mahan Moalemi assert that movements like Sinofuturism negotiate between valuing tradition — that is, ethnic loyalty — and modernization. This balance enables such movements to function “not [as] an ideology but a way to survive as well as a *modus vivendi*.²⁴⁵ Similarly, Lek claims that the goal of Sinofuturism is not originality or liberation but *survival*.²⁴⁶ China’s survival in the current age depends on how successfully it can adopt western economic principles while preserving Chinese “character,” whatever that may mean.

Lek’s interpretation of Sinofuturism helps explain the embrace of the trope of the “nameless, faceless” Asian in the 2008 Opening Ceremony, illustrated by performers who functioned as blocks of movable type, pixels on an LED clock, or threads of an invisible ink brush. The illegibility of the individual within the ceremony is the intentional rejection of western values of individuality and independence. The racialized mechanization of the human body has long been an essential part of the global economy, and the championing of this

²⁴³ Jennifer Rhee, *The Robotic Imaginary the Human and the Price of Dehumanized Labor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 4.

²⁴⁴ Lisa Lowe, *Intimacies of the Four Continents*, (Duke University Press, 2015), 2.

²⁴⁵ Merve Verlag, Armen Avanessian, Mahan Moalemi, “Ethnofuturisms: Findings in Common and Conflicting Futures,” (Zabriskie Buchladen für Kultur und Natur, 2018), 16.

https://www.academia.edu/36782398/Avanessian_Moalemi_Ethnofuturisms_intro_pdf

²⁴⁶ Lek, “Sinofuturism 中华未来主义.”

mechanization in the Opening Ceremony is Sinofuturism's conversion of the chains of colonial embodiment into armor. If the wealth of western nations was built on the rapacious exploitation of Chinese resources and the mechanization of Chinese coolie labor, then China's own labor-intensive methods of strengthening its economy are excused according to the logic of Lek's Sinofuturism.

Ultimately, emphasizing the value of Chinese collectivism serves nationalist purposes. One should be skeptical of claims that qualities like "independence" and "collectivism" are natural to one people and not another. For the past two centuries, Chinese political leaders have claimed that democracy is incompatible with the traditional Chinese mind — though by now it should be clear that the meaning of "tradition" changes with each leader. Although modernization enriches the state, it does not always translate into a better quality of life for its workers. David Harvey notes that the Chinese state embraced neoliberal economic reforms to "amass wealth and upgrade its technological capacities so as to be better able to manage internal dissent, to better defend itself against external aggression, and to project its power outwards onto its immediate geopolitical sphere of interest."²⁴⁷ Although China's rapid economic growth has "achieved rapid growth and alleviated the poverty of many," Harvey writes, China's neoliberalism has also reconstituted class power and widened socioeconomic disparities.²⁴⁸

Among those most affected by China's infrastructure priorities — along with Tibetans and Uyghurs — are the nation's working class, who exist at the social and physical fringe of urban centers, inhabiting the *chengxiang jiehebu* (城乡结合部), or "villages-in-the-city" (VICs).²⁴⁹ In preparation for the 2008 Olympics, "environmental improvement projects"

²⁴⁷ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 122.

²⁴⁸ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 155.

²⁴⁹ Ge Zhang, "Sino-no-futurism," in "Sinofuturism(s)," ed. Virginia L. Conn and Gabriele de Seta. *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2021): 92

demolished roughly 171 VICs, displacing about 74,100 permanent residents and around 296,400 migrants.²⁵⁰ Billboards of palm trees and beaches were erected to hide gritty neighborhoods from tourists.²⁵¹ Economists Hyun Bang Shin and Bingqin Li observe that between 2001 and 2008, Beijing's VICs bore a disproportionate share of the Games' costs, as the state prioritized the needs of visitors over those of local inhabitants — a pattern common among developing countries hosting mega-events.²⁵²

Sinofuturism and the VIC sit together uneasily. To scholar Ge Zhang, the VIC is defined by “unsanitary restaurants with trashy décor; dodgy home clinics... wet markets of fresh produce and various exotic meats... and internet cafés filled with underage dropouts who are bored stiff.” Ge sees the VIC as a challenge to conventional Sinofuturist frameworks.²⁵³ VICs, he says, are places where time stands still, where residents exist the “never-ending everyday.”²⁵⁴ Home to garbage recycling stations and factories along with the people who work in them, these areas contain the refuse of China’s project of modernization. Ge, in turn, criticizes the prevailing Anglo interpretation of Sinofuturism as merely “a techno-Orientalist reaction toward the impotence and expiry of the declinist West [rather] than an incisive provocation of Chinese futures concretely rooted in the Chinese condition.”²⁵⁵ He proposes that there are multiple coexisting Sinofuturisms and that the Sinofuturism that VIC residents experience is no less

²⁵⁰ Hyun Bang Shin and Bingqin Li, “Whose Games? The Costs of Being ‘Olympic Citizens’ in Beijing,” *Environment and Urbanization* 25, no. 2 (2013): 560.

²⁵¹ Stephen Wade, “Exiled artist Ai Weiwei reflects on Beijing Olympics,” AP News, February 3, 2022.

²⁵² Shin and Li, 561.; the immense cost of hosting the Olympics has also led many cities, particularly those in western democracies, to lose interest in hosting the Games. Beijing hosted the Olympics for the second time in the winter of 2022, and during the bidding process, five cities — all within western democracies — pulled out of the bidding. See: Victor Matheson and Rob Baade, “Rescuing the Olympic Games from Their Own Success,” *International Monetary Fund*, July 2021.

²⁵³ Ge, “Sino-no-futurism,” 94.

²⁵⁴ Ge, “Sino-no-futurism,” 94; Christophe Thouny, “Waiting for the Messiah: The Becoming Myth of Evangelion and Densha otoko.” *Mechademia* 4, no. 1 (2009): 114.

²⁵⁵ Ge, “Sino-no-futurism,” 93.

important than the version pushed by the state, which philosopher Yuk Hui contends is “only an acceleration of the European modern project.”²⁵⁶

But those living on China’s urban fringe are not necessarily passive victims of modernity. For instance, Dafen Art Village — situated on the Shenzhen city limits — differs from the typical VIC portrayed by Ge, partly because it has gained recognition for its state-of-the-art hand copies of famous western oil paintings.²⁵⁷ When I visited in the summer of 2024, I noticed a newly opened museum displaying local art. Those I passed were smoking, sharing beers, and playing cards with their friends; some were working at their easels and had earbuds in, painting from images on their phones. My goal is not to romanticize but to destigmatize the lives of those who live in precarity. Ge observes that the “do-it-so-your-kids-won’t-have-to mentality of postponing the future no longer persists among the younger generation. They put faith in a tiny profit margin and low-affect pleasures they can enjoy now rather than in an uncertain future...”²⁵⁸ This mindset is not confined to China’s urban fringes — it has also permeated mainstream work culture. Increasingly, Chinese youth are rejecting the grueling demands of the “996” white-collar schedule, instead choosing to withdraw from the competitive labor market and adopt a minimalist lifestyle sustained by low-pressure, part-time employment, which they call *tangping* (躺平), or “lying flat.”²⁵⁹ Columnist Alex Lo contends that “it’s China’s

²⁵⁶ Ge, “Sino-no-futurism,” 97.; Yuk Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics*, (Urbanomic Media, 2016): 297.

²⁵⁷ The 2016 documentary *China’s Van Goghs* by Yu Haibo and Kiki Tianqi Yumay have contributed to Dafen’s popularity and growth.

²⁵⁸ Ge, “Sino-no-futurism,” 95.

²⁵⁹ China is infamous for its work culture of “996” which is short for “9am to 9pm, 6 days a week.” Labor laws are very weak and it is illegal to create or join labor unions aside from the national state-approved labor union; Han-Yu Hsu, “How do Chinese people evaluate ‘Tang-Ping’ (lying flat) and effort-making: The moderation effect of return expectation,” *Front Psychology*, November 16, 2022.

bourgeoisie, not the proletariat, who will determine the future.”²⁶⁰ Perhaps the bourgeoisie are determining the future, but their position may not be entirely enviable.

Aware of the paradox of critiquing capitalist nations while incorporating capitalist elements into its own economy, the CCP maintains that socialism remains its ultimate goal.²⁶¹ Since launching its experiment in state-controlled capitalism, the government has framed capitalism as a temporary measure to close the developmental gap imposed by historical foreign exploitation.²⁶² Today, China is more feared than exploited. In many ways, events have unfolded as western critics predicted after the 2008 Games. “Since 2008, the government of China has further strengthened its control, and the human rights situation has further deteriorated,” Ai Weiwei, the renowned Chinese artist-in-exile and CCP dissident who helped design Beijing’s main Olympic stadium, told AP News in 2022.²⁶³

Meanwhile, China has taken significant steps to address sources of discontent. In 2018, the International Monetary Fund reported that China had overseen a “modest decline in inequality since 2008,”²⁶⁴ and in 2021, the central government unveiled a five-year plan aimed at achieving “common prosperity” by narrowing the wealth gap and improving the quality of life at the rural fringe by urbanizing more evenly.²⁶⁵ News organizations clamored that China was

²⁶⁰ Alex Lo, “Why modern China is most misunderstood,” *South China Morning Post*, April 23, 2019. <https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/3007373/why-modern-china-most-misunderstood>

²⁶¹ Michael Heazle and Nick Knight, *China–Japan Relations in the Twenty-first Century: Creating a Future Past?* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2007): 62.

²⁶² Heazle and Knight, *China–Japan Relations in the Twenty-first Century*, 62.

²⁶³ Ai Weiwei helped design the Bird’s Nest stadium in which the Opening Ceremony took place when he still held hope that China would open up to democracy; the curving beams of the stadium, he said, would symbolize China’s openness. Wade, “Exiled artist Ai Weiwei.”

²⁶⁴ David Dollar, “Poverty, Inequality, And Social Disparities During China’s Economic Reform,” World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 4253, (July 2007), 2. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/23550251_Poverty_Inequality_and_Social_Disparities_During_China's_Economic_Reform

²⁶⁵ *14th Five-Year Plan for High-Quality Development of the People’s Republic of China*, (Asian Development Bank, 2021): 1. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/705886/14th-five-year-plan-high-quality-development-prc.pdf>.

centering communism once more.²⁶⁶ In light of these changes, critiques of China's uneven modernization must be continuously reassessed as centralized governments like the CCP can change direction far quicker than democracies. China's strategy for shaping the future remains fluid, making its next move as unpredictable as the future itself.

For many, studying modern Chinese history is interesting insofar as it may assist in predicting China's future and, in turn, the future of the global order. Typically, these predictions take the form of projections of GDP growth or political analyses. Mega-events like the Olympics are either overlooked or used to reinforce existing western media narratives. During the 2008 Games, Ai Weiwei kept a diary in which he observed, "In this world where everything has a political dimension, we are now told we mustn't politicize things: This is simply a sporting event, detached from history and ideas and values — detached from human nature, even."²⁶⁷ Ai's observation highlights a broader issue with China's development: it often neglects the very people it claims to serve. It is these people who are compelled to build the future the state works toward, and it is these people whose homes were razed to build this future. Intellectualizing the futurist ideology driving the 2008 Games risks masking the lived realities and agency of those involved. Whether hidden behind painted billboards or hidden in blocks of type, we must not forget those people.

The summer of 2024 was the first time in a decade that my mother and I visited China. It was nearly unrecognizable. Bullet trains link every major city, nearly every service relies on smartphones, and restaurant menus come only as QR codes. In our budget hotel, we shared an elevator with a robot that was delivering room service. "Why did I even immigrate?" my mother joked. We were staying just minutes from where my mother grew up in Shanghai. In 2014, her

²⁶⁶ Stephen McDonell, "Changing China: Xi Jinping's effort to return to socialism," BBC, September 22, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-58579831>

²⁶⁷ Wade, "Exiled artist Ai Weiwei."

childhood *shikumen* (石库门) was slated for demolition.²⁶⁸ Upon our return in 2024, we found that it had been replaced with a shopping mall built as a *shikumen* pastiche. My mother wandered around, searching for someone to practice her Shanghaiese with, but no one we met was from the city.



Figure 16: My mother's old *shikumen*, now a shopping mall. Photo is my own.

On a mission to get the cheapest haircuts possible, we stumbled into a mall reminiscent of the ones I would frequent on childhood visits to China. Most of the storefronts were closed, only half of the lights were on, and the escalators were defunct. On the bottom floor were a few shops selling wholesale pajamas and bras. It was nothing like the upscale malls we had visited that summer, ones with gourmet restaurants, chandeliers, and air-conditioned tunnel access to the metro — a privilege one cannot take for granted in the intense July heat. And though this mall was a bit worn, it offered a welcome escape from the loud, bustling tourist areas we had been visiting. Most importantly, the AC still worked. A few children gathered by an open buffet, doing

²⁶⁸ A *shikumen* is a traditional Shanghai-style house that blends western architectural elements with Chinese courtyard designs.

homework next to their parents. Older women chatted as they ate their daily stock of tomato, egg, and rice.

Buildings are physical reminders of the past. If you visit any major Chinese city today, you will encounter many reminders of China's bygone visions of the future. The Olympic stadiums constructed for the 2008 Games still stand, though they are largely unused. This mall, an awkward blemish on China's shiny, futuristic veneer, will likely not be as fortunate as those stadiums. Like my mother's *shikumen*, it will be demolished in due time. But no one there seemed to mind. For now, at least, it can provide some shade.



Figure 17: An old shopping mall that will likely be demolished soon. Photo is my own.

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