

# China's Flat Earth: History and 8 August 2008\*

Geremie R. Barmé

**ABSTRACT** The opening ceremony of the 29th Olympiad in Beijing was celebrated in China as an opportunity for the country to “tell its story to the world.” This article offers a forensic analysis of that story and how it was created under Party fiat with the active collaboration of local and international arts figures. In a scene-by-scene description of the ceremony, the article also reviews the symbiotic relationship of avant-garde cultural activists and the party-state, a relationship that has continuously evolved throughout the Reform era (since 1978). It also discusses contentious historical issues related to the revival of real and imagined national traditions in the era of China's re-emergence on the global stage.

---

The opening ceremony of the 29th Olympiad in Beijing on 8 August 2008 was a much-anticipated event. It was an occasion for China to address the largest international audience it had ever had access to and to tell the world a story about itself. The stories that China – that is the People's Republic of China – wants to tell are intrinsically important, for they are commissioned and orchestrated by an unelected political party that has ruled for nearly 60 years and that has, for the last three decades, overseen a booming economy amidst relative domestic stability. Intended for mass consumption, the story at the Games was crafted to speak directly to the world of China's vision of itself. Sometimes, by tracing what has been avoided or suppressed in the narrative of such a story, it is possible to gain insights that are not necessarily in keeping with the authorial intention.

In designing the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, as well as the closing ceremony and subsequent Paralympics' ceremonies, the creative team nominally led by the internationally renowned film-maker Zhang Yimou 张艺谋 presented the world with a series of golden vistas of invention and amicable exchange. Pursuing the central theme of Communist Party policy, that of “harmony” (*hexie* 和谐), however, the directors of the show created a “flattened” narrative that eliminated China's 20th-century history of radical iconoclasm and struggle, as well as democratic aspiration.<sup>1</sup> The ceremonies were also an example

\* My thanks to Lois Conner for her support during my stay in the Olympic city during August 2008, Sang Ye for his advice and suggestions, and Gloria Davies for reading and commenting on the final draft. My work on Beijing, spectacle and the Olympics is supported by an Australian Research Council Federation Fellowship and the Research School of Pacific & Asian Studies, The Australian National University.

1 See Susan Brownell, *Beijing's Games: What the Olympics Mean to China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and

of the complex commerce in form and content between the party-state and members of China's cultural avant-garde. The following observations about the 8 August ceremony, by narrating the unfolding of the ceremony with reference to the context in which it was created, attempt to draw out some of the historical and cultural issues that the Olympic period casts into relief.

## A Revival

During July and August 2004, commentators in the Chinese media remarked approvingly on the fact that the Olympic city of Athens was both the site of ancient ruins and the centre of modern Greek national aspiration. They were quick to draw parallels between Athens and the Chinese capital of Beijing which was to host the 29th Olympiad in August 2008. However, a discomfiting historical connection between these two Olympic cities and the host city of the 30th Olympiad to be held in 2012, London, was overlooked.

The British Museum in London houses the marble friezes stripped from the Parthenon in Athens by Lord Elgin (Thomas Bruce), which are controversially known as the "Elgin Marbles." Bruce's son James, the eighth earl of Elgin, led an Anglo-French expeditionary force to Beijing, the capital of the Manchu-Qing empire, in the autumn of 1860 following the Second Opium War. In a punitive action against the Qing court he and his French colleagues directed the plunder and destruction of the extensive imperial palace gardens in Haidian 海淀, now the city's university district and a centre of high-tech industries. The razing of the Garden of Perfect Brightness (*Yuanming Yuan* 圆明园) and the surrounding area is an "event" that has taken on immense political significance in China, especially with the state-sponsored rise of patriotic sentiment since 1989.

The pillage of the Qing gardens, however, also marks China's entry into the modern international world. In 1861, the Xinyou coup (*xinyou zhengbian* 辛酉政变) brought to power a group of nobles who, directing policy in the name of the minority Tongzhi Emperor, launched the so-called Tongzhi restoration (*Tongzhi zhongxing* 同治中兴). This period, which lasted until the 1870s, saw the creation of a ministry of foreign affairs, the beginnings of new transport and communications networks as well as a revived military, and marked China's first attempt to address the issues of Western-style modernity. Although these efforts at reform were ultimately frustrated, the nascent engagement with the trading powers has been recognized since the 1990s as a significant moment in Chinese history, one that for some presaged the post-1978 era of opening up and reform.

---

*footnote continued*

Littlefield, 2008); and my "Olympic art and artifice," *American Interest*, Vol. 3, No. 6 (2008), pp. 72–78 at p. 76, online at <http://www.the-american-interest.com/ai2/article.cfm?Id=441&MIId=20>.

In 1999, Jiang Zemin, the Communist Party General Secretary and President of China from 1989 to 2003, used the arcane term “restoration” (*zhongxing* 中兴) in a poem celebrating meetings of the country’s congresses that spring. To some observers he was pointedly referring to the concept behind *zhongxing*, that is the restitution of political strength after a period of chaos and decline. “Spring has come to China [*Shenzhou* 神州] once more,” Jiang wrote,

Meeting in fellowship in Beijing to discuss the nation.  
The entire hall deliberates on one topic – restoration (*zhongxing*).  
Each syllable and word an expression of loyalty.<sup>2</sup>

## The Sundial

As Jiang Zemin and his leadership group were instrumental in securing the Olympics for China, and indeed in overseeing the revised plans for the city that would host the Games, it is perhaps no accident then that the Olympic opening and closing ceremonies on 8 and 24 August respectively were “bracketed” by oblique references to Jiang’s years in power. The first of these was the use of a digitally projected sundial (*rigui* 日晷) in the final seconds of the countdown to the opening ceremony set for the “auspicious” moment of eight minutes past 8 p.m. on 8 August 2008.<sup>3</sup> The *rigui* projected on to the rim of the Bird’s Nest National Stadium contained an unspoken acknowledgement both of dynastic time and of the Jiang Zemin era.

In traditional China, the *rigui* symbolized the unified time of the empire, and stylized sundials can be found outside the main audience halls and palace buildings in the Forbidden City. During the Jiang era when many elements of long-ignored, or previously excoriated, dynastic China found a place in the landscape of revivalism and re-articulated ethnic identities, the *rigui* enjoyed an ascendance as well. A highly stylized *rigui* was used as the basis for the design of the Millennium Altar (*shiji tan* 世纪坛), the first non-imperial-era “altar” in the capital, constructed in the late 1990s for the celebration of the new millennium in 2000. The spire of the altar is the centre point of a secondary north-south axis to the west of the old city of Beijing that runs from the altar (which features a museum and various public amenities) to the West Beijing Railway Station.

The Millennium Altar was designated as a new centre for mass civic celebration far from Tiananmen Square, the contentious symbolic heart of Beijing

2 In Chinese the poem reads, “*You shi Shenzhou caomu shen, / tongshang guoji ju Jingcheng, / Mantang gonghua zhongxing shi, / wanyu qianyan chizi qing.*” See Benjamin Lim, “China’s Jiang, the poet, calls for ‘revival,’” Reuter, 15 March 1999. I would note that “revival” (*fixing*), a term commonly used in the last decade when discussing China’s re-emergence as a world power, is different in connotation from the more nuanced “restoration” (*zhongxing*). One could argue that, through economic openness since the late 1970s, the Communist Party has been engaged in a restoration of its fortunes, as well as a revival of those of China as a whole. See also Mary C. Wright, *The Last Stand of Chinese Conservatism: the T’ung-Chih Restoration, 1862–1974* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957).

3 While eight, *balbat*, has auspicious connotations in southern China and diasporic communities, according to Beijing tradition the lucky numbers are six *liu* and nine *jiu*.

and the People's Republic tainted by a history of demonstrations, and repression. It was decorated with a plethora of national and cultural symbols representing the unity of the country's diverse peoples, their history and their hopes. When the government of Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji celebrated the awarding of the 29th Olympiad to Beijing in 2001, revellers were encouraged away from Tiananmen Square to party instead at the millennium altar.

Jiang and his wife Wang Yeping 王冶坪 were privileged guests at both the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Olympics, seated next to the present incumbent Hu Jintao and his wife Liu Yongqing 刘永清. The closing ceremony featured another reminder of the Jiang era: the singer Song Zuying 宋祖英. Long rumoured to be the former General Secretary's paramour and "artistic confidant,"<sup>4</sup> Song sang a duet with Plácido Domingo. The Spanish singer had his own history with the Olympic bid, having been invited to Beijing as one of the internationally renowned "Three Tenors" (the others being Luciano Pavarotti and José Carreras) to perform for the International Olympic Committee in June 2001 as part of the charm offensive aimed at securing the games for China.<sup>5</sup> Not long prior to his 2008 Olympic appearance, Domingo had also starred as the First Emperor, Qin Shihuang, in an earlier Zhang Yimou production (see below).

The Jiang era saw renewed interest in, and media exploitation of, China's dynastic histories generally and the Qing period in particular. In recent years as the country's booming economy and political stability brought about a period of self-assurance and prosperity not known since the 18th century, nostalgia for dynastic greatness, even that of the once-abjured Manchu rule of the Qing, has become possible. The mass media have been complicit in the promotion and commercialization of historical accounts that sidestep or suppress narratives about late-dynastic and modern China that do not conform to the Party-managed consensus on the country's past. These accounts not only offer a limited view of the high-socialist era under Mao, they also further entrench a popular impression of China as predominantly victim and colonial subject. In addition they flatten and harmonize the tortuous stories of ethnic conflict, invasion and domination of the Han by other peoples and present a narrative of the unity and amity of the "Chinese race" (*Zhonghua minzu* 中华民族). While specialist historians and writers attempt to present nuanced and conflicting versions of their country's modern history, in the mainstream print and electronic media, state-supervised mythologies constantly reinforce what students learn in school. Critical reading and speculation about events and persons that are a feature of popular history in less controlled and pluralistic environments (including television productions, popular novels and news stories) are made impossible in

4 See Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), pp. 135ff.

5 For more on this, see the chapter "The banquet of history" in my *The Forbidden City* (London: Profile Books/Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 185ff.

China. The resulting “historical ambience” feeds the powerful aggrieved nationalism that now appears to be one of the bedrocks of public opinion, in particular among younger people. The scale and power of such propagandized opinion becomes evident at moments of national outrage, such as that following the 1999 bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade or during the Japanese textbook protests of April 2005.<sup>6</sup> It was evident also during the Olympic torch relay from March to August 2008 that was a prelude to the Olympics itself.

## The Relay

The torch relay, which began at Olympus in Greece on 24 March 2008, provided a particular focus for a new outpouring of aggrieved nationalism. Earlier in the month, there had been a violent riot in Lhasa followed by widespread demonstrations in areas with significant Tibetan populations. The repression of the protests and the shrill rhetoric in the Chinese media regarding the plots of the “Dalai Lama clique” to rend China asunder fuelled international disquiet regarding Beijing. With the mounting pressure of popular revulsion at China’s brutal police tactics and media ferocity, the leaders of some major nations publicly expressed unease about attending the Olympic opening ceremony. Paranoia about China fuelled China’s own “paranoid nationalism.”<sup>7</sup>

The relay, the longest in Olympic history, was assailed in both London and Paris, and dramatically re-routed in San Francisco. This led not only to highly emotive responses on all sides, but according to some it also strengthened the determination of the Communist Party leadership to intervene in and directly manage the Beijing Olympics as a whole during the lead up to August.<sup>8</sup>

The Olympic torch relay and its inviolate progress became a source of powerful emotions related to national unity and historical memories of the depredations of colonial powers. When added to media and academic discourse on the post-colonial years and extreme rhetoric about the violence in Lhasa in March, these emotions fed into an international display of Chinese (that is, mainstream Han) unity. During this process, the Olympic torch, something that should by all rights belong to the world community, increasingly became in the minds of many people a symbol of China. Indeed, the torch, or “sacred flame” (*shenghuo* 圣火) as it was referred to, became a quasi-sacerdotal symbol of super-national Chinese identity.<sup>9</sup>

6 For my comment on the latter, see “Mirrors of history,” posted on the History News Network in 2005 at <http://hnn.us/roundup/entries/11876.html> and in May 2008 in Beijing by Danwei.org at [http://www.danwei.org/nationalism/mirrors\\_of\\_history.php](http://www.danwei.org/nationalism/mirrors_of_history.php).

7 The term “paranoid nationalism” comes from Ghassan Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society* (Sydney: Pluto Press; and London: The Merlin Press, 2003). Hage’s expression refers to those who feel dispossessed by transcendental capitalism and neo-liberal governments, whereas I use it to refer to a range of patriotic sentiment resulting from a particular mix of education, guided media and actual grievance felt by Han Chinese, both in and outside China.

8 The highly invasive policing programme formulated by the Party and security officials, called the “Secure Olympics Action Plan” (*Ping’an Aoyun xingdong*), covered everything from the issuing of visas to the deployment of local vigilantes in the greater Beijing area.

9 Following the collapse of the Qing dynasty the concept of the “sacred” in Chinese politics has

Some Chinese observers of the relay, in particular Gan Yang 甘阳 and Wang Xiaodong 王晓东, well known for their brand of reactive nationalism, hailed the clamorous response of the international Chinese community to the torch relay. Gan Yang saw it as more significant than the May Fourth Movement of 1919, which is usually presented in official accounts as being a patriotic student protest. He declared that now that China was in the ascendant, this global protest, the 19 April Movement as he dubbed it, was emblematic of a new Chinese “worldism” (*shijiezhuyi* 世界主义), one that was unlike the narrow Amero-centric globalization that he (and many others) claimed dominated views of international politics. Like so many Chinese commentators, Gan used the terms “Western media” and “the West” with little finesse, reflecting a Sino-American fixation that invariably distorts public discussions of such issues. He hailed in particular the anti-CNN stance of protesters who cast the broadcaster CNN as the symbol of international Western media bias and neo-colonial attempts to distort Chinese realities for nefarious ends. He declared that, “the outpouring of the Chinese people of the world on 19 April told CNN and the like that I-DO-NOT-BELIEVE your reports.”<sup>10</sup>

When the torch eventually arrived in Beijing in early August it began its local journey after a formal ceremony in the courtyard at Wu Men 午门, or Meridian Gate, the main entrance to the Forbidden City. As runners carried the torch around the Beijing region along a path that described the character *he* 和 or “harmony,” local people without invitations were generally kept well away.<sup>11</sup>

## The Ceremony

The final destination of the Olympic torch was the Bird's Nest National Stadium where it was used to light the Olympic flame that would blaze throughout the Games. This symbolic moment was preceded by the cultural performance that was a central feature of the opening ceremony. Entitled “The beautiful Olympics” (*meilide Aolinpike* 美丽的奥林匹克), the show was divided into two

---

*footnote continued*

experienced a number of transformations. In dynastic China, not only was the emperor's body sacred and inviolate, but the imperial precinct itself was a sacrosanct and forbidden realm (*jindi*). Gradually, during the Republican era and later, the concepts of the numinous, spiritual and sacerdotal related to the dynastic house and its mandated right to rule were transferred to the whole territory of China, frequently referred to by the old poetic term *Shenzhou*, as is the case in Jiang Zemin's poem quoted above. The nation, long subject to the depredations of imperial powers, would be spoken of as a territory (*lingtu*) possessed of a sacred (*shensheng*) and indivisible (*buke fenge*) nature.

- 10 Gan Yang, “Dakai guomen, fang tamen jinlai” (“Open the nation's door and let them come in”), *21 Shiji jingji daobao* (21st Century Economic Herald), 29 April 2008, online at <http://www.douban.com/group/topic/3051862/>. “I-DO-NOT-BELIEVE” is a reference to a famous 1970s poem by Bei Dao, “The answer” (*Huida*). See Geremie Barmé and John Minford (eds.), *Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voices of Conscience* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2nd ed., 1988), p. 236.
- 11 See Rowan Callick, “Beijing locals heated as Olympic torch enters city,” *The Australian*, 7 August 2008, online at <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,24140109-601,00.html>.

“acts” of roughly equal length, each containing a number of vignettes. The first act, “Brilliant civilization” (*canlan wenming* 灿烂文明), employed three of the “four great inventions” (*si da faming* 四大发明) of the pre-modern era as an organizing theme. The second act, “Glorious age” (*huihuang shidai* 辉煌时代), reflected the country’s present and hopes for the future.

While Zhang Yimou had overall directorial authority for the design and staging of the ceremonies, Zhang Jigang 张继钢, deputy minister of propaganda in the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) General Logistics Department who had worked on the eight-minute Chinese “preview ceremony” at the 2004 Athens Games with Zhang Yimou, was directly responsible for the first half of the 2008 opening ceremony, including the prelude. This build-up featured the countdown to eight minutes past 8 p.m. featuring the sundial mentioned earlier, the drum welcome, followed by the firework “footsteps of history” and the formal flag-raising.<sup>12</sup> The second half, including the entrance of the athletes to the stadium and the lighting of the Olympic flame, was overseen by Chen Weiya 陈维亚, artistic director of the Song and Dance Ensemble of the East (*Dongfang gewu tuan* 东方歌舞团). Chen also designed the closing ceremony, for which he would eventually give himself, without modesty, a mark of 100 out of 100.<sup>13</sup> The Party cadre directly in charge of this creative team was Zhang Heping 张和平, a former leading Beijing arts bureaucrat and film-producer.<sup>14</sup>

Apart from the conflict of directorial intent created by this group, there were various basic expectations that had to be met. Central Party leaders issued instructions outlining their demands for the show. There was a constant flow of directives, instructions, corrections and comments throughout the design process, but above all the Party wanted the ceremonies to be “outstanding, innovative, [employ] local colour, [reflect] the spirit of the age and [take] an international perspective” (*jingcai, xinying, minzu tese, shidai tezheng, shijie yangguang* 精彩, 新颖, 民族特色, 时代特征, 世界眼光). The creative team had to “use an international language to tell China’s story,” as Zhang Heping later put it,<sup>15</sup> but it

12 See Zhang Ying’s interview with Zhang Jigang, “3 fen 28 miao: tiyu shishang zuihaode daojiishi” (“Three minutes and 30 seconds: the best countdown in sporting history”), *Nanfang zhoumo* (*Southern Weekend*), “Aoyun tekan: siwen Zhongguo” (“Olympics special: a refined China”), 14 August 2008, p. A3.

13 Zhang Ying, “Chunwan zuobudaode kuanghuan – Chen Weiya tan bimushi” (“A carnival unlike any spring festival evening celebration – Chen Weiya talks about the closing ceremony”), *Nanfang zhoumo*, 28 August 2008, online at <http://www.infzm.com/content/16459>. Chen is known for the designs he created for previous mass gatherings in Tiananmen Square, the arts performance of the 2001 World University Student Games and the opening ceremony of the 2005 East Asia Games.

14 Zhang had something of a traditional socialist-era arts career first as a student of theatre (1961–68), before becoming a cadre in a Mao Thought Propaganda Station, Daxing county, Beijing from 1970 to 1975. Later he was deputy chief of the Beijing Cultural Bureau (1995–96) and general manager of the Beijing Zijin Cheng Film Company (1996–98), which produced a number of Feng Xiaogang’s best-known comic films, before becoming director of the Beijing Cultural Bureau and its Party secretary (1998–2003). Zhang wrote many well-known theme songs for films and TV productions. In 2008, he was made head of the prestigious Beijing People’s Art Theatre (*Renmin yishu juyuan*).

15 “Zhang Heping: yong shijie yuyan jiang Zhongguo gushi” (“Zhang Heping: using an international language to tell China’s story”), *Sanlian shenghuo zhoukan* (*Sanlian Life Weekly*), No. 492 (18 August 2008), pp. 68–71, at p. 70.

was a story that perforce dovetailed with the Party's propaganda priorities. It is hardly surprising then that Zhang attributed the success of the opening ceremony to flawless "ideological work." Moreover, he said, "we were able to ensure meticulous co-ordination because we have a rigorous organizational system."<sup>16</sup> The spirit of the team, he said, was best expressed by the slogan that was on display in the creative headquarters: "Benefit the motherland above all" (*zuguode liyi gaoyu yiqie* 祖国利益高于一切).

When preparations for the ceremony got under way in March 2005 the panel of judges received 409 submissions. These were whittled down to 13 practicable proposals, which were presented to the selection committee of Party leaders and relevant arts bureaucrats who chose five for further development.<sup>17</sup> From the start, the challenge was to avoid designing a performance that recalled Maoist-era parades, frequently derided as consisting of "human wave tactics" (*renhai zhanshu* 人海战术) of a kind still evident in North Korea's annual *Arirang* callisthenics. Although Zhang Yimou was sensitive to any suggestion that the grandeur of the Beijing Olympics could be compared to the 1936 Berlin Olympics staged by the Nazis, 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. He even went so far as to declare that in Beijing they had produced a "new *Arirang*."<sup>18</sup>

## The Drum-roll

In the event, the 2,008 drummers, who struck stylized drums during the final countdown to the opening ceremony after the appearance of the sundial, were PLA soldiers. They were instructed to regard smiling and waving at the end of their exhausting performance "as a political task." The drums themselves were an imaginative interpretation of the ancient *fou* 缶, a vessel or instrument originally made from earthenware or in some cases bronze. The popularity of this solemn, and resoundingly hypnotic, prelude to the opening ceremony led to much discussion of the origins of the *fou* and its suitability for such an occasion. In the unruly Chinese "blogosphere" one observer immediately pointed out that the sounding of *fou* did not necessarily signal a welcome, as the official media had claimed. They recalled instead a lament ascribed to Qu Yuan 屈原 (third century BCE), the famous minister and poet exiled from court by malicious slanderers:

The world is turbulent and impure;  
They call a cicada's wing heavy and a ton weight light;  
The brazen bell is smashed and discarded; the earthen crock [*fou*] is thunderously sounded;

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p. 71.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Zhang Ying and Xia Chen, "Zhang Yimou jiemi kaimushi" ("Zhang Yimou reveals the secrets of the opening ceremony"), *Nanfang zhoumo*, "Olympics special," 14 August 2008, p. A6.



The slanderer struts proudly, the wise man lurks unknown.  
Alas, I am silenced: who can know of my integrity?<sup>19</sup>

The grandiose and regimented ceremony also stimulated reactions among some foreign observers that were quite different from those intended by the designers. As one North American commentator wondered, “what kind of society is it that can afford to make patterns out of its people?”<sup>20</sup>

## History’s Footsteps

Following the sonorous drumming prologue, the focus of the opening ceremony momentarily moved outside the confines of the Bird’s Nest as screens telecast a series of 29 firework explosions in the form of mammoth footprints that “paced” a line along the ancient central axis of Beijing from the reconstructed Yongding Men 永定门 in the south, through Tiananmen Square and then north to the Olympic Park and the National Stadium itself.<sup>21</sup> These “footsteps of history” (*lishi zuji* 历史足迹), as they were called, were the creation of another member of Zhang Yimou’s team, Cai Guoqiang 蔡国强.

Cai, whose title was General Designer for Visual Effects of the Olympic Ceremonies, is an internationally renowned artist. Although originally from Quanzhou 泉州 in Fujian province, since the 1980s he has lived variously in Tokyo and New York. After his proposal for the “footsteps of history” was accepted for the Olympic opening he relocated to Beijing and worked with other pyrotechnical professionals to design the fireworks that were a feature of all four Olympic ceremonies.<sup>22</sup> The creators of the extravaganza claimed that fireworks not only along the axis of Beijing but also set off at various locations throughout the city during the opening and closing ceremonies to create a visual “performance art work” made this Olympics unique.<sup>23</sup> The vision was never in

- 19 Qu Yuan, “Bu ju, divination,” translated by David Hawkes in *The Songs of the South: An Anthology of Ancient Chinese Poems by Qu Yuan and Other Poets* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 205. For a comment on the difficulties encountered in performing this scene, see Zhang Ying, “Yong daguo feng-fan ji ‘fou’” (“Beat the *fou* with the style of a great nation”), *Nanfang zhoumo*, “Olympics special,” 14 August 2008, p. A5, an interview with Sun Yupeng, head of the countdown and drumming team.
- 20 Anthony Lane, “The only games in town: week one at the Olympics,” *The New Yorker*, 25 August 2008, p. 28.
- 21 Sixteen of the “footprints” traced the original north-south axis of Beijing, from Yongding Men on the South Second Ring Road to the Drum Tower. “Footprint” 17 was at the new City Park just inside the old northern wall of the Inner City, and 18 to 25 were along the extended axis. The 26th was at the soccer field of the Olympics Sports Centre and the 27th was at Juyong Guan, the famous pass at the Great Wall on the way to Bada Ling. The last two were inside the Olympic Park. See “Fire in the city,” *China Daily*, 8 August 2008, p. 6.
- 22 Cai was responsible for the artistic vision behind the fireworks, but for their realization he relied on a team of specialists including Cheng Yanwen, who is credited with developing the technology to produce the “footsteps,” and Pan Gongpei, a professor at Nanjing University of Technology and Engineering. See Wang Hongliang, “Kaiqi yichang yanhuo shengyande ‘mimi’?” (“Revealing the ‘secrets’ behind a pyrotechnical banquet”), *Sanlian shenghuo zhoukan*, No. 492 (18 August 2008), pp. 104–08.
- 23 See “Kaimushi jiaoyin tajin Meishu Guan” (“The footprints of the opening ceremony walk into the [China] Art Gallery”), *Xin jing bao* (*The Beijing News*), 20 August 2008, also online at <http://www.thebeijingnews.com/culture/2008/08-20/008@034614.htm>. See also Zhou Wenhan, “Cai Guoqiang: xingzhe zuji” (“Cai Guoqiang: footsteps of a traveller”), *Jingji guancha bao*

doubt but, given the air quality of Beijing, visibility remained a problem. Far in advance of 8 August a second, even more secret, design group worked in parallel with Cai and his colleagues to produce a digital version of the firework “footprints” so that the audience in the Bird’s Nest and television viewers would see a steady and unsullied interpretation of the actual performance.<sup>24</sup> To achieve the desired effect they edited out most of the pollution-haze (or “autumnal mist” as Chinese propagandists constantly insisted on describing it) that continued to blanket the city during the first week of the Games despite years of effort and billions of dollars.

Beijing had been turned on its head to help create the effects of the opening ceremony that Cai helped design. Six hundred years ago the city was oriented along a north-south axis from the south of the old city through the Forbidden City. In the 1910s, Chang’an Avenue, now a multi-lane highway that runs east-to-west through the heart of Beijing, became the focus for military parades. From the 1950s, mass rallies marched along the avenue past Tiananmen Square, most recently in 1999 to mark the 50th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic.<sup>25</sup> It was not until the early 21st century that revised city plans allowed for a re-orientation of the city along the original north-south axis. The southern city gate of Yongding Men, demolished in the 1950s, was reconstructed and a major park created leading north to the Qian Men district, which itself was largely demolished and rebuilt in *faux*-Qing-dynasty style, in time for the Games.<sup>26</sup>

It was the 35th anniversary of the People’s Republic in 1984 – which also silently marked the 85th birthday of Deng Xiaoping – that really commemorated the new era of openness and reform. Tiananmen Gate itself was refurbished for the occasion and although the 1984 parade was carefully choreographed, there was one eruption of unscripted emotion. As they marched past the gate, a group from Peking University held up a homemade sign bearing the simple greeting, “Hello Xiaoping!” (*Xiaoping, ninhao!* 小平您好!). The heartfelt sentiment was not caught on film by official film crews; the “spontaneous moment” was later restaged for the cameras.

---

*footnote continued*

(*The Economic Observer*), 25 August 2008, with pictures of “history’s footsteps” and a photograph of the pyrotechnical footsteps over Tiananmen Square made by Cai’s long-time collaborator Ihara Hiro. For an online version of Zhou’s article, see [http://www.eeo.com.cn/Business\\_lives/editors\\_choice/2008/08/27/111727.html](http://www.eeo.com.cn/Business_lives/editors_choice/2008/08/27/111727.html). For another picture of the footsteps over Tiananmen Square, see *Sanlian shenghuo zhoukan*, No. 492 (18 August 2008), p. 48.

- 24 Cai accepted the need to make a digital version of his “vision,” and explains his reasoning in an interview with Yang Ruichun, “Zhi you nan gao, bun neng luan gao: Cai Guoqiang fangtan” (“You have to deal with difficulty, but not act irresponsibly: in conversation with Cai Guoqiang”), *Nanfang zhounuo*, “Olympics special,” 14 August 2008, p. A9.
- 25 See my essay “Let the spiel begin,” published 2006, online at [http://www.danwei.org/2008\\_beijing\\_olympic\\_games/let\\_the\\_spiel\\_begin\\_by\\_geremie.php](http://www.danwei.org/2008_beijing_olympic_games/let_the_spiel_begin_by_geremie.php).
- 26 See Kelly Layton, “Qianmen, gateway to a Beijing heritage,” *China Heritage Quarterly*, No. 12 (2007), online at [http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/articles.php?searchterm=012\\_qianmen.inc&issue=012](http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/articles.php?searchterm=012_qianmen.inc&issue=012); and my “Beijing reoriented, an Olympic undertaking,” opening address to the biennial conference of the Chinese Studies Association of Australia, June 2007.

The 1984 parade was also when members of China's artistic avant-garde became tentatively enmeshed with the official culture. That celebration featured Deng reviewing troops from a Red Flag limousine with an open roof and an air force flyby over Tiananmen Square. Because of the clouded and smoggy weather conditions, however, the aerial display was rendered all but invisible. Frustrated and embarrassed that the Party leadership did not see the result of their painstaking preparations, PLA commanders later approached the controversial young film-director Chen Kaige 陈凯歌, a leading force in China's cinematic "new wave," and his cinematographer collaborator Zhang Yimou to make a movie about the demanding training of the pilots used for the celebrations. Chen's 1986 propaganda piece, *The Big Parade* (*Da yuebing* 大阅兵), remains a curious artefact of that early moment of co-operation between the nascent avant-garde and the self-aggrandizing state.<sup>27</sup>

For Cai Guoqiang, another artist with avant-garde credentials, the Olympics were not the first commission he had received to lionize the state. He had designed a fireworks display for the 2001 meeting of APEC in Shanghai and, reflecting on that occasion when he had "made a painting with fireworks" and on his work for the Olympics, Cai said: "To my mind major staged celebrations are a [political] movement, a revolution, requiring the deployment of a vast army. Not only do I achieve the joy of realizing my creation but also a form of pleasure. It is also a relief to be able to do something for the country."<sup>28</sup>

## The Painting

Zhang Yimou used a quotation from Mao Zedong to describe his own thinking behind the tactics of the opening: we "used the past to serve the present and the foreign to serve China." Despite this overt reference to Mao Zedong Thought, however, many observers noted that the Chairman himself was entirely absent. Of course, they might have missed the pregnant absence of the dead leader in the heavily rewritten "Paean to the Motherland" (*Gechang zuguo* 歌唱祖国) that was sung (or rather mimed) following the *fou*-drum performance, but, in reality, the Great Helmsman did get a look in, if only obliquely.

On a rectangular scroll that rested on top of the LED (light-emitting diode) screen featured at centre stage, following the singing of the national anthem and the flag-raising ceremony in which ethnic minorities were represented by Han children in local costume, dancers traced out a painting in the "impressionistic" or *xieyi* 写意 style of traditional art. The scroll represents one of the

27 For an example of how some members of the internationally vaunted contemporary avant-garde used the Olympics to further ingratiate themselves with the state, see Li Ying and Yang Fan, "Xianfeng yishujiade Aoyun zhi meng" ("The Olympic dream of avant-garde artists"), 29th (29th, the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games official newspaper produced by *Beijing Daily*), 4 August 2008. One of the featured works at the 798 Art District was a rendition of a Mao-jacketed discus thrower.

28 "Duihua Cai Guoqiang – xiangshou chuangyi shixiande xingfu" ("Cai Guoqiang in conversation – the joy of realizing one's creativity), *Quanzhou wanbao* (*Quanzhou Evening News*), 13 August 2008.

Four Great Inventions – paper – and the lithe movements of the dancers create a vision of mountains and a river, to which was added a calligraphic circle for the sun.<sup>29</sup> It is a scene familiar from countless ink paintings. The directors created a generic picture, finding in particular inspiration in such famous works as Zhang Zeduan's 张择端 "Along the river during the Qingming festival" (*Qingming shanghe tu* 清明上河图) and Wang Ximeng's 王希梦 "Ten-thousand *li* of rivers and mountains" (*Qianli jiangshan tu* 千里江山图), both dating from the Song dynasty (12th century).<sup>30</sup> However, the scene also evoked far more recent images, including the mural that forms a backdrop to the statue of Mao in the Chairman Mao Memorial Hall in the centre of Beijing. That picture, created under the supervision of Huang Yongyu 黄永玉, a noted artist persecuted during the Cultural Revolution,<sup>31</sup> was on the theme of "How splendid the rivers and mountains of China" (*jiangshan ru ci duo jiao* 江山如此多娇), the opening line of the second stanza in Mao's most famous 1936 poem "Snow, to the tune of *Qinyuan Chun*" (*Qinyuan Chun, Xue* 沁园春雪). That poem lists some of the most prominent military emperors of dynastic China (Qin Shihuang 秦始皇, Han Wudi 汉武帝, Tang Taizong 唐太宗, Song Taizu 宋太祖 and Genghis Khan 成吉思汗 of the Yuan) and ends with an observation that all these great men fade in comparison to the true heroes of the modern world: by inference the people of China. From the time that it appeared in the press during the Second World War, "Snow" has generally been interpreted as being about Mao himself, the hero of his age.

In their design for the opening ceremony, Zhang Yimou and his creative team achieve, intentionally or not, a rethinking of this reference. Eventually, in act two of the performance, the painting is coloured in by children, the sun becoming a jaunty "smiley face" (see below). In the remaining empty space of the landscape beneath the mountains, following the conclusion of the performance and during the ebullient entrance of the competitors into the stadium, the world's athletes tracked the rainbow of Olympic colours as they take up their positions. Thus, a Chinese landscape, with its coded cultural and political references, is transformed into a work that embraces the global community. Zhang Yimou claimed that the idea for this finale was his alone, and through it he offered a positive

29 In earlier rehearsed versions of the opening ceremony the sun did feature in other ways. In one, as the scroll painting opened a performer was to run into the stadium before being lifted by wires to chase a sun. This was named after the fable about "Kua Fu chasing the sun" (*Kua Fu zhu ri*) in order to tame it so he could end a calamitous drought. The reference to Kua Fu was problematic because, in modern Chinese, the saying *Kua fu zhu ri* means vainglorious ambition or a miscalculated attempt to do something far beyond one's abilities. See the comments by the choreographer Han Lixun in Li Wei, "Wumei sheji: jianchi Zhongguo meixue chuantong" ("Set design: in pursuit of traditional Chinese aesthetics"), *Sanlian shenghuo zhoukan*, No. 492 (18 August 2008), p. 130.

30 See Zhang Jigang's remarks in his interview with Zhang Ying, "Three minutes and 30 seconds."

31 It is interesting to note that Huang Yongyu was awarded the Olympic Art Prize on 24 August 2008. See "Huang Yongyu huo Aolinpike yishujiang" ("Huang Yongyu awarded Olympic arts prize"), *Xin jing bao*, 26 August 2008. His winning 3.5 m x 2.5 m painting was entitled "China = mc<sup>2</sup>." Huang's story was the basis for the controversial film scenario "Unrequited love" (*Kulian*), which contained a pointedly anti-Mao scene featuring a setting sun. The scenario led to the first mini-purge of culture in the early 1980s.

message for the future of China's engagement with the world, not only to international audiences but perhaps also to China's own leaders, who, apart from Premier Wen Jiabao, for the most part sat stony-faced throughout the extravaganza. This solemnity, in stark contrast to the relaxed and often animated expressions of the numerous world leaders nearby, reflected the po-faced dignity expected of those entrusted by the people with their inhuman burdens.<sup>32</sup>

## The Master

Originally, the creative team had wanted to use the large LED display on the stadium floor to show how representational characters like “mountain” *shan* 山 and “river” *chuan* 川 had developed. In that way, Zhang Yimou remarked, “we could teach the world a few basic Chinese characters.” But those plans remained on the drawing board. Instead, the choreographed landscape painting was followed by a scene featuring the 3,000 disciples of the pre-Qin philosopher Confucius, and a chanting recitation of aphorisms from his famous collected sayings, the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 论语). These were chosen to reflect a didactic and conservative version of Confucianism. They start with the second line of the *Analects*: “To have friends coming from afar: is this not a delight?” (*you peng zi yuanfang lai, bu yi yue hu* 有朋自远方来, 不亦乐乎). Some interpretations of the original hold that *peng*, “friend,” actually means fellow students or scholars,<sup>33</sup> but the immediate resonance of the line is with the Maoist-era slogan, “We have friends all over the world” (*Women de pengyou bian tianxia* 我们的朋友遍天下). Another line from the Master that was to be sung by the chanting disciples was: “A gentleman is easy going and free; a vulgar man is always tense and fretful” (*junzi tan dangdang, xiaoren chang qiqi* 君子坦荡荡, 小人常戚戚).<sup>34</sup> Because it was felt that this line “had no particularly positive connotation and could lead to misinterpretation” during the rehearsal-cum-Party critique on 30 July, it was replaced with the less rhythmic but more acceptable quotation: “all within the Four Seas are his brothers” (*sihai zhi nei, jie xiongdi ye* 四海之内, 皆兄弟也).<sup>35</sup> The overseer of the project, Zhang Heping, claimed that the chanted quotations “expressed traditional Chinese values”<sup>36</sup>; they also happily conformed with the

32 The generally impassive expressions on the faces of China's leaders were not unique to the Olympic opening, although those who attended actual athletic events did upon occasion evince a measure of emotional engagement. Chinese TV producers have remarked that it is always a challenge to get state and Party leaders to lighten up for the cameras. In this context, see Ann Condi's “One world, whose dream?” posted on Danwei, the Beijing-based media site edited by Jeremy Goldkorn, on 13 August 2008 at [http://www.danwei.org/tv/insert\\_image\\_hereinsert\\_captio\\_12.php](http://www.danwei.org/tv/insert_image_hereinsert_captio_12.php).

33 *Lunyu*, 1.1, for this interpretation, see Li Ling, *Sangjia gou: wo du Lunyu, xiuding ben* (*Dog Without a Master: Reading Lunyu*, revised ed.) (Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 2007), pp. 51–52.

34 *Lunyu*, 7.37, for this translation, see Simon Leys, *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), p. 33.

35 *Lunyu*, 12.5, Leys, *The Analects*, p. 56; and, “Zhang Yimou: zixin le, cai neng langman he zhizao meng-huan” (“Zhang Yimou: only when we are confident can we be romantic and be able to create dreams-capes”), *Sanlian shenghuo zhoukan*, No. 492 (18 August 2008), p. 78.

36 “Zhang Heping: using an international language to tell China's story,” p. 70.

earnest didacticism of contemporary Party policy which includes a national code of conduct introduced by Hu Jintao in early 2006 under the rubric of “the Eight Glories and the Eight Shames” (*barong bachi* 八荣八耻).<sup>37</sup>

More broadly, in recent times Confucius has been restored as a moral exemplar emblematic of service to the state and respect for hierarchical authority, and hence lending traditional weight to the party-state's watchword of social stability.<sup>38</sup> Soft-power advocates see an international role for statist Confucianism, and one thinker, Gan Yang, has gone so far as to assert that the People's Republic is already a “Confucian socialist republic” (*rujia shehuizhuyi gongheguo* 儒家社会主义共和国).<sup>39</sup> A popular commentator, Yu Dan 于丹, has become a mass media star on the basis of her unctuous interpretations of the *Analects*. According to Yu, the central message of Confucius is that people should be satisfied with their lot and can achieve mental calm through acceptance. In 1935, the writer Lu Xun 鲁迅 published what remains a powerful critique of such interpretations of the Confucian legacy,<sup>40</sup> and he is frequently invoked by liberal intellectuals who are alert to disingenuous uses of tradition to sanctify authoritarian rule in China today.<sup>41</sup> Not surprisingly, Yu Dan featured prominently during the Olympic period as a media commentator and even as one of the runners in the Beijing leg of the Olympic torch relay. Critics point out that these advocates of conservative Confucianism ignore entirely the other strong messages of the *Analects*: those about a Confucius who placed principle and righteousness above all.<sup>42</sup>

In the opening ceremony, the army of Confucian disciples uses the bamboo-slip scrolls they hold to punctuate their chanting and as their performance comes to an end they give way to an undulating rectangle of “type-face blocks” (*huozi mo* 活字模). These represent another of the Four Great Inventions: moveable type and printing.<sup>43</sup> The surging of the characters provides a mesmerizing

37 The Associated Press translation of what they dubbed “The eight dos and don'ts” was: “Love, do not harm the motherland; serve, don't disserve the people; uphold science, don't be ignorant and unenlightened, work hard, don't be lazy and hate work; be united and help each other, don't gain benefits at the expense of others; be honest and trustworthy, not profit-mongering at the expense of your values; be disciplined and law-abiding instead of chaotic and lawless; know plain living and hard struggle, do not wallow in luxuries and pleasures.”

38 For a painstaking and thoughtful analysis of the various strains of “New Confucianism,” see John Makeham, *Lost Soul: “Confucianism” in Contemporary Chinese Discourse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Centre, 2008), esp. pp. 316–30.

39 Gan Yang, “Zhongguo daolu: sanshi nian he liushi nian” (“China's way: 30 years and 60 years”), originally published in *Dushu*, No. 6 (2007), and online at [http://www.caogen.com/blog/infor\\_detail.aspx?id=200&articleId=7504](http://www.caogen.com/blog/infor_detail.aspx?id=200&articleId=7504).

40 Lu Xun, “Zai xiandai Zhongguo de Kongfuzi” (“Confucius in modern China”), collected in *Qiejie ting zawen erji* (*Qiejie Pavilion Essays, Second Collection*), in *Lu Xun quanji* (*The Complete Works of Lu Xun*) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1981), Vol. 6, pp. 313–19.

41 For a cogent discussion of these issues, see Qian Liqun, “Kongfuzi zai dangxia Zhongguo de mingyun – 2007 niande guan cha yu sikao zhi yi” (“The fate of Confucius in present-day China – observations and thoughts on 2007”), *Suibi* (*Essays*), Vol. 4, No. 177 (2008), pp. 3–18.

42 *Ibid.*

43 For an interview with the designer of the “type-face blocks,” see Yuan Yue, “Xin shidaide ‘huo’ zi yinshuashu” (“Printing with ‘live’ characters in the new age”), *Sanlian shenghuo zhoukan*, No. 492 (18 August 2008), pp. 155–57.

spectacle and although numerous characters are embossed on the blocks, they are collectively used to “print” one word only: “harmony” *he* 和, albeit in three different styles of Chinese script.

Although Hu Jintao made “harmony” *hexie* central to contemporary Party policy, it was under his predecessor Jiang Zemin that the concept (Jiang favoured the term *hehe* 和合) was initially employed to update and modernize Deng Xiaoping’s long-term call for social “stability and unity” (*anding tuanjie* 安定团结). While party-state policy promotes the “harmonious society” and “scientific development,” the reality behind the rhetoric is often highly militant and in many cases reflects the long decades when the Party saw itself as embattled and in constant struggle, whether with external or internal, real or imagined enemies. It should thus be noted that, despite the genuine enthusiasm and good will of the young volunteers at the Olympic venues, the Beijing Olympics were “packaged and policed to a fault” and, as some observers also commented, appropriately accompanied by a “looming lack of joy.”<sup>44</sup>

To an extent the Maoist era dictum of tireless struggle had found unlikely expression in the controversial lead-up to the Olympic months. Mao was a champion of physical strength from his youth, and believed that the spiritual revival of China would start only when the nation’s collective physique (*tizhi* 体质) improved.<sup>45</sup> In his youth, he famously remarked that, “To struggle with heaven is a boundless joy; to struggle with the earth is a boundless joy; to struggle with others is a boundless joy” (*yu tian fendou qi le wu qiong; yu di fendou qi le wu qiong; yu ren fendou qi le wu qiong* 与天奋斗其乐无穷, 与地奋斗其乐无穷, 与人奋斗其乐无穷).<sup>46</sup> While the official message from the Chinese party-state is one of harmony between men, and with nature (one repeated in the opening and closing ceremonies of the Paralympics), before the Games the organizers struggled long and hard to stave off pollution and, for the opening ceremony, a forecast down-pour.<sup>47</sup> They struggled with the earth to provide water for the greening of Beijing, drinking water and even for some aquatic events at Olympic venues (and more epically with the aftermath of the 12 May Wenchuan earthquake).<sup>48</sup>

44 Anthony Lane, “Fun and games: week two at the Olympics,” *The New Yorker*, 1 September 2008, p. 71. Again, this had a great deal to do with the highly intrusive effects of the “Secure Olympics Action Plan”. See n. 8.

45 See, for example, Ershibahua xiansheng (Mao Zedong), “Tiyu zhi yanjiu” (“A study of physical culture”), *Xin qingnian* (*La Jeunesse*), Vol. 3, No. 2 (1917), pp. 66–67; and, Susan Brownell, *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People’s Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 39, 53 and 56. Some internet commentators were outraged that Mao, a crucial proponent of Chinese sports and physical fitness, was not given due credit for the growth of Chinese athletics during the Olympics.

46 See Jin Chongji (ed.), *Mao Zedong zhuan (1893–1949)* (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1996), p. 27.

47 Guo Hu of the Beijing Municipal Meteorological Bureau announced that 1,104 cloud-seeding missiles were launched around Beijing from 4.00 p.m. to 11.39 p.m. from 21 sites to prevent the rain that had been forecast from spoiling the opening ceremony.

48 Dai Qing, “Thirsty dragon at the Olympics,” *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. 54, No. 19 (6 December 2007), online at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/20850>; and, Dai Qing’s editorial in “The heritage of Beijing water,” No. 16 (2008) of *China Heritage Quarterly* ([www.chinaheritagequarterly.org](http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org)).

More generally, the struggle with people had been a particular focus for many months; these included NGO activists, controversial individuals, the media, Tibetan rioters and demonstrators, Uyghur separatists, international protesters and, for a time, even foreign leaders who considered boycotting 8 August.

## The Despot

While, as noted above, Mao was evident during the opening ceremony only through his absence, the first ruler of a united China, Qin Shihuang (second century BCE), cast a more palpable shadow over the proceedings. Commemorated for forging a unified empire, creating a standardized writing system and spreading the benefits of regulated weights and measures, Qin Shihuang's draconian era and his infamous "burning of books and burying of scholars" (*fen shu keng ru* 焚书坑儒) made him the object of obloquy for much of Chinese history. That is, until the 1950s when Mao not only extolled Qin as a great unifier but, on occasion, claimed that his own government had gone even further than that of the ancient despot. When Zhang Yimou made a film celebrating Qin Shihuang in 2002 (*Hero* 英雄), he came in for criticism from liberal intellectuals who saw in it a lavish justification for authoritarian politics.

After the opening ceremony, Zhang remarked that if it had been up to him, he would have employed many more ideas from *The First Emperor*, a production he directed for the Metropolitan Opera of New York in December 2006. That show is also significant since the three-person creative team who worked on it – Zhang, Pan Yue 樊跃 and Wang Chaoge 王潮歌, or the "Iron Triangle" (*tie sanjiao* 铁三角) as they called themselves – were crucial to Beijing 2008.<sup>49</sup> An unabashed celebration of the infamous tyrant, the opera featured Plácido Domingo as the Qin ruler and the music of Tan Dun 谭盾, with a libretto written with the participation of the acclaimed novelist Ha Jin. Tan's music featured in the Olympics while, as noted above, Domingo would star in a duet with Song Zuying (who was dressed in an outlandish costume that, as one blogger observed, made her look like "Ming the Merciless") in the closing ceremony.<sup>50</sup>

The 2006 opera ends with the cast chanting "Long live the First Emperor" and "Long live China!" to the strains of the revolutionary-era *The Yellow River Cantata* (*Huanghe dahechang* 黄河大合唱).<sup>51</sup> This is in striking contrast to another recent account of the First Emperor, the Hollywood movie *Mummy*:

49 See Zhang Ying's interviews with Wang and Pan respectively: "Ji pa guoren bu manyi, ye pa shijie bu manyi" ("Afraid that the people of China would be dissatisfied, and just as fearful that the world would be unsatisfied"); and "Mei shang yihui weishengjian dou duo yige xin zhuyi" ("There'd be a new idea every time you went to the toilet"), *Nanfang zhounuo*, "Olympics special," 14 August 2008, p. A4.

50 Although Song had her clothes made especially for her in Beijing, many of the most striking costumes in the opening ceremony were the creation of the Japanese designer Ishioka Eiko, who had also worked on *The First Emperor* for the Met.

51 See Li Jie's colourful review "Exporting nationalism: Zhang Yimou's *The First Emperor*," in *China Rights Forum*, No. 1 (2007), pp. 93–95.



*The Tomb of the Dragon Emperor* directed by Rob Cohn, released on 1 August 2008 and starring Brendan Fraser, Michelle Yeoh and Jet Li. In the film Li plays a revived Qin Shihuang who is brought back by Chinese patriots in the 1940s so that he can lead a strong and united China to conquer the world. Or, as he puts it, “I will restore order and crush the scourge of freedom.” The final battle features a clash between the emperor’s terracotta army and that led by a revived Qin-era general, along with the Anglo-American leads. They have their own chant, “Long live freedom! Down with the First Emperor!” Not surprisingly, these lines and the cries for “Freedom!” from the avenging army of the undead were changed in the version of the film released in China immediately following the Olympics.

Originally, the scene following the printing blocks was to consist of 115 huge shadow puppets (*piying* 皮影) of the kind used in Shaanxi Qinqiang 秦腔 Opera. They were designed as an army of terracotta warriors, their silhouettes highlighted by in-built lights.<sup>52</sup> Recalling not only the era of the First Emperor but also Zhang Yimou’s obsession with the warriors, this phalanx of monster puppets was to have entered the stadium in a victory march extolling that other renowned legacy of Qin hegemony, the Great Wall of China. The scene was deleted at the last minute on advice from central leaders who were concerned that an overt celebration of martial valour was not in keeping with the inclusive and peaceful message they wished to convey. The director of the segment claimed that the change was made because the lighting on the puppets was undependable.<sup>53</sup> After repeating the character for “harmony,” the writing blocks were now configured to feature the image of a benign Great Wall. Emblematic of China’s long history of territorial dispute, violence and warfare in the past, from the mid 20th century the Wall too has been recast as a symbol of strength and multi-ethnic unity. Or, as the official narration put it on the night: “One of the greatest engineering feats in the annals of human civilization, [the Wall] is the crystallization of the courage and wisdom of China’s ancient labouring peoples. It represents the unbending determination of the Chinese people (*Zhonghua minzu*).”

Moments later, the Wall’s crenulations dissolve to give way to a field of peach blossoms where, originally, the terracotta warriors would have entered in dramatic triumph. Instead the narrator intones: “We find ourselves in a garden suffused with spring colour. This peach-blossom fairyland of harmony and romance expresses the Chinese people’s love for peace.” This is an overt reference to “Record of the land of peach blossoms” (*Taohua yuan ji* 桃花源记) by the fourth-century writer Tao Yuanming 陶渊明, the most famous utopian work in literary Chinese. Tao himself abandoned an official career to live near Lu Shan 庐山 in what is now Jiangxi province at a time of political strife and social

52 Photographs of these figures featured in the media following the first rehearsal of the show in July.

53 Zhang Weidong, deputy director of the Old Soldiers’ Arts Ensemble of the Beijing Military Region, was in charge of operatic material used in the ceremony. See his interview with Zhang Ying, “8 tian paichu ‘xiqu’” (“Opera” rehearsed in eight days), *Nanfang zhoumo*, “Olympics special,” 14 August 2008, p. A5. A picture of the warrior puppets in rehearsal was published in *ibid.* p. A7.

violence. Mao Zedong famously chided the otherworldly writer at the time of the Lu Shan Conference during the Great Leap Forward in 1959 when he asked in a poem:

Who knows whither Prefect Tao Yuanming is gone  
Now that he can till fields in the Land of Peach Blossoms?<sup>54</sup>

## The Compass

With the march of the warriors censored, a replacement scene involving Beijing Opera puppets was hastily rehearsed and acted as a break before the next major thematic element of the opening: the silk routes and the invention of the compass. The silk routes, both inland and via the sea, are lauded by the narrator in what sounds like a foreign policy mantra: they were developed so China could “make friends in every quarter, trade goods, learn from each other and enjoy respectful interactions” (*guang jiao pengyou, hutong youwu, bici xuexi, li shang wanglai* 广交朋友, 互通有无, 彼此学习, 礼尚往来).

China's inventions and their profound impact on the development of European civilization were first remarked upon by Francis Bacon and later the missionary Walter Medhurst, but it was the Cambridge scientist Joseph Needham who is credited with the list of the Four Great Inventions that, through the work of such Party scholars as Fan Wenlan 范文澜 and Guo Moruo 郭沫若 in the 1950s, would enter the Chinese vernacular. Today they are controversial, as some writers argue that the list was written by foreigners during the colonial past and that China's achievements are not merely a footnote to the history of mercantile Europe. The ancient overland trade routes are mentioned in passing in the opening ceremony, but it is the compass (the ancient *si nan* 司南<sup>55</sup>) and the sea voyages of the Ming-era eunuch admiral Zheng He 郑和 (early 15th century), stylized through the balletic movement of oars to form the shape of a seafaring vessel, that are used to exemplify contact and trade with the outside world. While the voyages of Zheng He are a source of considerable debate,<sup>56</sup> the Chinese authorities deploy historically dubious claims about the extent of his travels to ingratiate themselves with diplomatic partners.<sup>57</sup>

54 See my “Beijing, a garden of violence,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2008), p. 624.

55 The model used for this was created by Wang Zhenduo in the late 1940s. Many of Wang's “reconstructions” of ancient Chinese scientific devices remain highly controversial.

56 Gavin Menzies' book *1421: The Year China Discovered the World* (Bantam Books, 2002) while embraced by political figures and cultural activists in Singapore, China and elsewhere has been dismissed by serious scholars. Debates about maritime trade and their relationship to views of China as “landlocked” and “inward looking” were brought into the public arena by the controversial 1988 TV series *River Elegy* (*Heshang*). It is beyond the scope of this article to investigate how the 2008 opening ceremony relates to these broader discussions.

57 In 2003, for example, President Hu Jintao asserted that Zheng He's fleet visited the shores of Australia in the 1420s. See his address to a Joint Sitting of the Australian Parliament, “Constantly increasing common ground,” on 24 October 2003, the text of which can be found online at <http://australianpolitics.com/news/2003/10/03-10-24b.shtml>.

## The Dream

“Only when a nation-race [*minzu* 民族] is confident can it be romantic and create its own dreamscapes,” Zhang Yimou stated in interviews following the successful opening of the games. “It’s not enough to create the huge and monumental.” He said that he hoped that the ceremony would inspire foreigners not only to appreciate China’s “romanticism” and “dreams” but also to go and read a few books about Chinese culture.<sup>58</sup> The account of traditional China finishes with a segment entitled “Ritual music” (*Li yue* 礼乐). In this the LED display is used both as a stage for performers of a short excerpt from *Kunqu* 昆曲 Opera, and for an overview of Chinese art. In this segment, the history of dynastic rise and fall, as well as the long periods of divided kingdoms and non-Han rule, are collapsed into one neat and continuous age: the Tang-Song-Yuan-Ming-Qing (唐宋元明清), represented by scrolling through a series of paintings and projected *objets d’art*. In the process, 32 “dragon pillars” in two rows protrude from the stadium floor each bearing a musician with a *pipa* 琵琶, or Chinese lute. This formal musical finale, which also features palace women in elaborate costumes, leads into the second half of the performance that focuses on contemporary China and its vision for the future.

Many Chinese commentators were quick to note that the “Chinese story” jumped from bold dynastic achievement to a less than cogent spectacle of China today and tomorrow. For decades, the struggles of modern China – foreign incursions, political collapse, natural disaster and poverty – have been the central feature of official history. In a show aimed at celebrating the best of the nation, however, the story of modern China from the 1840s’ Opium War was entirely elided. Ignoring completely the history and considerable achievements of the Republican era,<sup>59</sup> Zhang Yimou himself conceded that it was a challenge to represent post-1949 China. Should they start with 1949, he asked one interviewer, or perhaps the 1960s? Then, he asked, how were they supposed to represent the 1950s or the 1970s?

Zhang also ignored the politically unsettled 1980s (which, apart from economic growth, also featured purges in 1983, 1987 and 1989) and even the 1990s, a time of rapid transformation and avaricious capital accumulation. The question of how to represent contemporary life and politics in mass spectacles has been an issue for decades. The 1964 song-and-dance extravaganza that celebrated China’s revolutionary history, *The East is Red* (*Dongfang hong* 东方红), originally consisted of seven acts, the last of which extolled the achievements of the post-1949 socialist revolution. This production, along with the explosion of the country’s first atom bomb, was regarded at the time as marking the arrival of the People’s Republic on the world stage. But in the final film version of

58 “Zhang Yimou: only when we are confident can we be romantic and be able to create dreamscapes,” p. 73.

59 For a recent overview, see Frank Dikötter, *The Age of Openness: China before Mao* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

the show, history stops with the founding of New China in 1949, as everything thereafter was regarded as being too contentious.<sup>60</sup> With regard to contemporary China, Zhang Yimou observed that it was easier to use relatively abstract but easily communicated ideas to develop the themes of environmental protection and youth.<sup>61</sup>

In particular a circle of 2008 tai chi performers was used to convey the traditional (and now revived) awareness of nature in the context of the modern world.<sup>62</sup> They perform around the original scroll painting which a group of school-aged children now colour in as they chant an environmental warning: "The earth is getting warmer, the glaciers are melting, agricultural land is dwindling, the birds have disappeared...." In response they promise to plant trees and grass: "The spring will return, as will the birds." The scene finishes with a flight of multi-coloured birds projected on the rim of the stadium representing what the narration calls China's "green homeland" (*lüse jiayuan* 绿色家园). Taikongnauts, as China's astronauts are called, touch the ground that opens to reveal a huge sphere that is disgorged centre-stage representing the "shared homeland" (*gongyou jiayuan* 公有家园) of humanity.<sup>63</sup> Although couched in the bland language of the "Olympic dream," the sentiments expressed as the blue orb, created by the British stagecraft designer Mark Fisher, emerges with 58 performers running and dancing around it consisted of a positive message about human unity and breadth of vision and tolerance. Two performers, Liu Huan 刘欢<sup>64</sup> and the English singer Sarah Brightman, appear standing on the sphere which changes hue as they sing the 2008 Olympic theme song, "You and me" (*Ni he wo* 你和我). This duet by known stars was the result of a last-minute decision made when the directors realized the preceding tai chi performance was so strong it threatened to overshadow the unknown singers chosen to perform the theme song. Liu was extolled for embodying the "virility" (*yanggang* 阳刚) of China.<sup>65</sup>

60 *The East is Red* was denounced in the Cultural Revolution and for a time the new artistic representation of modern China's revolutionary history was *The Five Milestones* (*Wuge lichengbei*), or five sacred revolutionary sites related to Mao's rise to power.

61 "Zhang Yimou: only when we are confident can we be romantic and be able to create dreamscapes," p. 79.

62 The tai chi performance featured students from the Henan Shaolin Temple School, not PLA soldiers. According to Zhang Heping, this addition was suggested by Party leaders when Liu Qi, Politburo member and head of the Beijing Olympic Committee, and Zhang were making a report on the progress of the opening ceremony to the standing committee of the Politburo in April 2007. Members of the Politburo pointed out that tai chi should be included since so many people practised it for their morning exercises, and the relevant, and in this case powerful, addition was made. See "Zhang Heping: using an international language to tell China's story," p. 70. See also Judith Farquhar and Qicheng Zhang, "Biopolitical Beijing: pleasure, sovereignty, and self-cultivation in China's capital," *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2005), pp. 303–07, which offers a perceptive discussion of the "lordship" created by the autonomous *tai-chi* practitioner in pursuit of *yangsheng*, or self-cultivation.

63 For the use of "homeland" *jiayuan* in post-1989 China, see my "Beijing, a garden of violence," pp. 632–33.

64 Liu came to prominence as a young singer in 1990 for, among other things, his rendition of the theme song of the TV riposte to *River Elegy* called *On the Road: a Century of Marxism*. For details of the series and the theme song, see "The graying of Chinese culture" in my *In the Red, on Contemporary Chinese Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 120.

65 "Zhang Heping: using an international language to tell China's story," p. 71.

In the second half of the performance, highlights – one of which is the moment when the mass of “green emissaries” (*lüse shizhe* 绿色使者) covered in lights “construct” a Bird’s Nest Stadium out of their bodies – are quickly crowded out by a plethora of scenes brimming with ideas but lacking the panache and pacing of the first half of the show. While the Chinese voice-over on CCTV1 spoke repeatedly about traditional aesthetics and the language of understatement and elegance, modern glitz and busyness revealed another, unintended, message. The *xieyi*-style of Chinese art featured in the scroll painting that acts as the *leit-motif* for the whole show values in particular emptiness or lacunae: those pregnant spaces untouched by the brush that bring the composition to life; the “vacuum” in which meaning finds full expression.<sup>66</sup> While the opening ceremony presented a display of selected dynastic achievements with elegance, in the second half of the show the creative team’s faltering command of aesthetic moderation results in other absences: of coherence and, indeed, of vision.

## The End

In the lead-up to the Olympics, socially engaged Chinese people who do not acquiesce to the Communist Party’s claim to sole ownership of the Chinese story, whether of the past, the present or of the future, were silenced, or at least remained muted. Even the story of China’s centennial Olympic aspiration was “harmonized” in keeping with the official line. Early on the propaganda authorities decided to promote the Games as a fulfilment of a century-old dream first expressed in 1908. The idea that 2008 was a moment of national wish fulfilment (*yuan meng* 圆梦) was powerfully attractive to both Chinese and international media outlets. By concentrating on this timescape, the dream merchants sidestepped the other history of China and the Olympics. Although the runner Liu Changchun 刘长春, the “lone representative of four hundred million people” at the 1932 Los Angeles Games was frequently mentioned,<sup>67</sup> China’s debut as an Olympic nation was glossed over. For, the first time that China as a modern state participated *en masse* in the event was the 1936 Berlin Olympics. The Republic of China sent 69 athletes, along with 39 observers and 150 journalists, to those Games. Their failure to win any medals led to widespread hand-wringing and further debate about the country’s competitive strength.<sup>68</sup>

On 8 August 2008, the creative team behind the opening ceremony wanted to present the world with a vision of China as a modern and open society, one whose citizens think of themselves as members of the global community. Zhang Yimou would say, “In concrete terms, how does the Chinese sense of modernity find expression: is it about being wealthier, building more and faster,

66 Called *kong* or *xu*, these intentional absences in paintings are also known as *liubai*.

67 See Xu Guoqi, *Olympic Dreams: China and Sports, 1895–2008* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 42–43.

68 See Christopher Hilton, *Hitler’s Olympics: The 1936 Berlin Olympic Games* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2006), p. 183.

the vast market in goods, boundless consumerism and material prosperity? For me none of these things is really the point. What matters is what people have in their hearts. Human beings are important, a return to the basics of what it is to be human.”<sup>69</sup>

Long years of politics had a profoundly distorting impact on the Chinese, said Zhang. Only recently have they gradually recovered a sense of a shared humanity. It was, he hastened to add, not a “humanity writ large” (*daxiede ren* 大写的人) – a reference to the humanist debates of the early 1980s when this expression was used to refer to human rights and freedoms. Zhang and his colleagues concentrated instead on an abstract humanity, one that conformed to the propaganda priorities of the Games as outlined in official directives, that is, “to make people the focus” (*yi ren wei ben* 以人为本).<sup>70</sup> The abstractions that feature in the second half of the opening ceremony related to nature, exploration and dreaming, the fulfilment of a humanity that acts for the collective good. It was a neat interpretation of the basic Party line.

Despite the flat and self-congratulatory Chinese history featured in the opening and closing ceremonies of the Beijing Olympics, there is nevertheless also the “story” of international artistic collaboration that made the ceremonies such a success. Many of the high-points of the opening ceremony were the result of a collective effort of designers working closely with Chinese artists, some of whom themselves had returned from overseas sojourns, as well as non-Chinese creators. This too is part of the story of China today; it is one that speaks of ingenuity, as well as of moments of imagination and inspiration.

The ceremonies also reflected in important ways the complex relations that prevail between China's political and artistic elites. After the opening ceremony Cai Guoqiang was asked whether he had experienced untoward political pressure on his artistic vision. Ever the diplomat he responded: “Our country has become more open, so we have to be more open ourselves. We are living under this system, if there is something wrong with the state then there is something wrong with all of us, you can't only put the onus on the Other....” He went on to observe that his involvement in the ceremonies was complex, part of a long-term interaction between creative individuals, whether artists or political leaders. He summed up the dilemmas germane to the relationship in the following way: “If artists do something good they get all the credit for their creativity. If they fail then people blame interference from the leadership and the system. I think that's a

69 “Zhang Yimou: only when we are confident can we be romantic and be able to create dreamscapes,” p. 78.

70 See, for example, Cai Fuchao, “Yi Aoyun xuanchuan wei qiji, kaichuang shoudu xinwen xuanchuan gongzuo xin jumian” (“Use the Olympic Games as an opportunity to create a new vista for media propaganda work in the capital”), *Qushi zazhi* (*Seeking the Truth*), No. 485 (2008), p. 23. Cai was the deputy mayor of Beijing and municipal propaganda chief. “To make people the focus” is integral to the Party's socio-economic programme centred on “the concept of scientific development” (*kexue fazhan guan*) and one enshrined by the 17th Party Congress in October 2007.

dilemma that can't continue as it is. The country needs you to change, but you also need to change it, and you have to transform the leadership.”<sup>71</sup>

Internationally, the 2008 Beijing Olympics were, on the whole, hailed as an extraordinary, even surprising, success, at least in terms of the athletic events themselves. Criticisms of human rights abuses, media manipulation and general obfuscation were persistent. Even when it was all over, the tireless hand of China's propagandists continued its prestidigitation. At the closing ceremony on 24 August, Jacques Rogge, the president of the International Olympic Committee, offered the much-anticipated official evaluation of the Games. Under the former IOC president José Samaranch, the accepted formula was to praise the host country for having organized “the best Games ever.” Despite his controversial compliance with most Chinese demands, however, at this point Rogge finally prevaricated and said he would avoid this tired cliché. In place of the usual courtesy, he declared instead that Beijing 2008 “were truly exceptional Games.” Not to be deprived of a plaudit, the relevant Chinese authorities delivered a creative translation solution that was immediately issued by the Xinhua News Agency: “*Zhe shi yijie zhenzhengde wuyulunbide Aoyun hui*” (这是一届真正的无与伦比的奥运会). In this enhanced translation the word “exceptional” transmogrified into “incomparable.” Rogge's original statement was one of diplomatic fudging; the immodest translation implied that no Games past could compare with those of Beijing 2008, and none in the future would be in the same league.

While China presented the world with a flattened vista of its own history, the events surrounding the 2008 Olympics – the torch relay, an unprecedented security operation, vehement rhetoric and populist fervour – presented a more uneven terrain, one that, in the post-Olympic years, may prove to be difficult to navigate, both for concerned people in China and for the international community.

## Postscript

*The 2008 Olympic creative team was reassembled for the 1 October 2009 National Day celebrations to mark the 60th anniversary of the People's Republic of China. According to a 20 January 2009 Xinhua News Agency report, Liu Qi would oversee the mass parade at Tiananmen Square (not including the display of military hardware or PLA marchers) and other related festive activities. Zhang Yimou was charged with the overall direction of the evening fireworks gala designed by Cai Guoqiang.*

71 Yang Ruichun, “Zhi you nan gao, bu neng luan gao: Cai Guoqiang fangtan” (“Coping with difficulty, and not acting irresponsibly: in conversation with Cai Guoqiang”), *Nanfang zhoubao*, “Olympics special,” 14 August 2008, p. A9.