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## Studie

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# ***The Beijing Olympics and the Art of Nation-State Maintenance***

Jeroen de Kloet, Gladys Pak Lei Chong, and Wei Liu

### **Abstract**

This article maps out how different actors are involved in the promotion and mediation of the Olympics. It looks at the roles of, first, the nation-state, through an analysis of the promotional materials; second, the art world and global companies, through an analysis of the touring exhibition “Sport in Art” and the Beijing art district 798; and third, the Western press and activists, through a brief analysis of the critique of the Games in the Netherlands and the Chinese response to that critique. Our analysis shows that the imageries promoting the Games are never fully under control of their producers. The Beijing Olympics, we argue, should be perceived as a field of contestation, in which conflicting discourses, constituted by different regimes of truth produced by distinct interest groups, vie for global attention. (Manuscript received February 25, 2008; accepted for publication April 1, 2008)

*Keywords: China, Beijing Olympics, media, art*

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## Studie

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# **Die Olympischen Spiele 2008 in Beijing und die Kunst der Aufrechterhaltung des Nationalstaates**

Jeroen de Kloet, Gladys Pak Lei Chong und Wei Liu

### **Abstract**

Dieser Beitrag gibt einen Einblick, wie verschiedene Akteure in die Vermarktung und Vermittlung der Olympischen Spiele involviert sind. Er befasst sich erstens mittels einer Analyse von Werbematerialien mit der Rolle des Nationalstaats, zweitens mittels einer Analyse der Wanderausstellung „Sport in Art“ und des „798 Art District“ in Beijing mit der Rolle der Kunstszene und globaler Unternehmen, und drittens mittels einer kurzen Analyse der niederländischen Kritik an den Spielen und der chinesischen Reaktion darauf mit westlichen Pressestimmen und Aktivisten. Unsere Untersuchung zeigt, dass die anlässlich der Spiele geschaffene Metaphorik niemals vollständig der Kontrolle ihrer Produzenten unterliegt. Wir argumentieren, dass die Olympischen Spiele in Beijing als ein Ort des Wettstreits zwischen konfligierenden Diskursen verstanden werden sollten, die von verschiedenen Wahrheitsansprüchen spezifischer Interessengruppen geschaffen werden und um die globale Aufmerksamkeit konkurrieren. (Manuskript eingereicht am 25.02.2008; zur Veröffentlichung angenommen am 01.04.2008)

*Keywords: China, Olympische Spiele in Beijing, Medien, Kunst*

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The Beijing Olympic Games is to serve as a window to showcase the city's high-tech achievements and its innovative strength. [...] The Beijing Olympic Games will be an occasion to spread modern Olympic ideas, while displaying splendid Chinese culture, Beijing's historical and cultural heritage, and its residents' positive attitudes. It will also be an opportunity to advance cultural exchanges, to deepen understanding and friendship between the peoples of the world. (Official Website of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games n.y.)

2008 – Welcome to China! (Kungfoo, Beijing hip hop band)

### **Imagining a New China**

“One World, One Dream” is the slogan of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games (BOG). However, this cosmopolitan ideal begs the following urgent questions: Whose world and whose dream? And what kind of world and what kind of dream? In addition, the immediate wave of popular and official nationalism that swept over China following 13 July 2001, when Beijing was awarded the Games, also rendered such a cosmopolitan ideal dubious. What is not dubious is that the Games come at a critical juncture of globalisation and grand socioeconomic transformation in China (Xin 2006:90). With reason, we must add, as China envisions itself as an upcoming world power of the twenty-first century (Gries & Rosen 2004). The Beijing 2008 Olympics

is a national event and a symbolic showcase through which the central government of China intends to demonstrate to the world the country's economic achievements over the past two decades. Hosting a successful Olympics carries great weight for Beijing and China as a whole. (Ren 2008:180)

The Games' celebration of Chineseness conflates with a crucial ideological shift of the 1990s, when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) changed its legitimising ideology from communism to a market-driven nationalism (Barmé 1999; Gries 2004; Hughes 2006; Wang 1996; Zhao 2004). During the Games, a historically rooted yet highly modernised Beijing (Broudehoux 2004), signifying a China ready for a capitalist twenty-first century, will be promoted. Beijing as a global city plays a crucial role in this Olympiad, which is primarily presented as the Beijing Olympics. To promote Beijing as an upcoming global city, self-Orientalising

tactics (Ong 1999; Chang 2005), advocating a historical Chineseness (Forbidden City, Great Wall), as well as future-oriented imageries (skyscrapers, shopping malls) will be invoked.

In a multiplicity of ways, the BOG are being used by the state to educate and discipline its citizens and to present a revamped yet rooted China to the world. Citizens, journalists, and tourists will be presented with a state-sanctioned version of the imagined community called China (cf. Anderson 2006 [1983]). The Games will promote a nation that navigates between nationalism and a market-driven cosmopolitanism. But this navigation faces a foggy and controversial route. As Close et al. observe:

Whether the PRC's [People's Republic of China] governing regime will manage to use the 2008 Games to present an image of a highly unified and increasingly successful nation-state to the world, or whether instead the PRC's unification will be revealed as a facade, not to mention further diminished, is yet to be seen. (Close et al. 2007:144; see also deLisle 2008)

Just as the CCP's version of Chinese nationalism is deeply contested (Gries 2004; Hughes 2006; Shue 2004), so will the staging of a new China in conjunction with the Olympic Games be highly controversial, not only in mainland China but also regionally, in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and internationally. Increasingly, human rights activists are calling for a boycott of the Games or asking leaders to voice their protest. The controversies and protests stirred up by the Tibet support groups that accompanied the torch relay in London, Paris and San Francisco in April 2008 provide a case in point of how other parties are challenging the official celebration of the Beijing Olympics. The Games indeed provide a timely and spectacular staging ground for the CCP to glorify China, but they simultaneously instigate voices of discontent and resistance that may undermine this glorification of China. Media, both online and offline, will serve as the prime theatre for this (re)construction and contestation of a twenty-first century China.

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<sup>1</sup> The authors would like to thank Heike Holbig, Yiu Fai Chow and the two anonymous reviewers for their critical comments on our text.

<sup>2</sup> The 5-year project started in September 2007. Titled "Celebrations and Contestations of Chineseness – The Beijing 2008 Olympics and Twenty-first Century Imaginations of Place, Culture

results of our first round of data collection in November 2007. In this article, we will try to map out how different actors are involved in the promotion, mediation, and contestation of the Olympics: first, the nation-state, through our analysis of the promotional materials; second, the art world and global companies, through our analysis of the touring exhibition “Sport in Art” and the Beijing art district 798; and third, the Western press and activists, through our brief analysis of the critique of the Games in the Netherlands and the Chinese response to that critique. Our research shows how the Olympics should be seen as a field of contestation, in which conflicting discourses, constituted by different regimes of truth produced by various interest groups, vie for global attention. Despite rigorous official attempts to control the imageries and discourses, we argue, it is impossible for the state and the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad (BOCOG) to monopolise the meanings attached to the BOG.

There is hardly a more important set of narratives for the twenty-first century than those concerning the role of China in the world and as an internally-governing power. And, as a consequence, there are few narratives that so many actors seek to shape with such fervency. (Price 2008:110)

The Games represent a pivotal arena in which China’s position in the world is being negotiated, not just by China, but also by the world at large.

### **Real Imaginations**

Our analysis revolves around the notion of imagination. Following the work of Arjun Appadurai, we do not perceive imagination as mere fantasy, escape or contemplation; instead, it is

imagination, in its collective forms, that creates ideas of neighborhood and nationhood [...] imagination is today a staging ground for action, and not only for escape. (Appadurai 1996:7)

In that sense, the imageries surrounding the Beijing Olympics are to be perceived as real imaginations – a phrase resonating with Manuel Castells’ notion of “real virtuality” (Castells 1998). In the process of constructing and displaying the nation as a unit – an imagined community (Anderson 2006 [1983]) – the role of

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and Identity”, the project is carried out by the authors of this article.

media is crucial. As Benedict Anderson shows, the rise of the modern nation is linked to the convergence of capitalism and print technology, which created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation. (Anderson 2006 [1983]:46)

The nation is imagined

because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. (Ibid.:6)

This does not render the nation-state less real, as testified by the strong sentiments of patriotism that are currently sweeping over mainland China.

Whereas Anderson theorises on the origins of the modern nation-state, we take the Olympic Games primarily as an ongoing and indispensable project of (symbolic) nation-state maintenance. The art of maintaining the nation-state involves a daily semiotic struggle. According to Billig, everyday life is saturated with a range of expressions of what he calls “banal nationalism”. These are, to him, the

ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced. It is argued that these habits are not removed from everyday life, as some supporters have supposed. Daily, the nation is indicated, or ‘flagged’, in the lives of its citizenry. Nationalism, far from being an intermittent mood in established nations, is the endemic condition. (Billig 1995:6)

While Billig writes explicitly about “the West”, we will show that his remarks apply equally to China.

Yet, discourse can never be fully under control, will never be completely unitary; it always contains possibilities for reading against the grain and holds potential moments of heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981). The state-driven ideal of an imagined community entails in practice a field of contestation revolving around different articulations of “China” and of “Chineseness” (Chatterjee 1993; Duara 1997; Shue 2004). As Chatterjee remarks aptly in his critique of Anderson, whose imagined community are we talking about, and should our imaginations remain forever colonised? (Chatterjee 1993:5). That the state-driven symbolic maintenance of the imagination of China is ongoing and indispensable underlines that it is never complete or completely successful. As Foucault reminds us:

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently,

this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.  
(Foucault 1980:95)

The Games will therefore be used to promote state-sanctioned ideals as well as alternative articulations of what constitutes China and Chineseness. The Olympic Games will become more like a cacophony of voices, of discourses – some more powerful, some less powerful. Careful analysis of this contestation of ideological discourses before, during, and after the Olympic Games will provide further insight into the solidity of the discursive control of the CCP and the International Olympic Committee (IOC).<sup>3</sup> Our article presents a first, modest step towards such an analysis.

### **Official Imaginations of the Olympic City and its Citizens**

Walking in the city of Beijing today, one would have no difficulty noticing the omnipresence of the BOG-related posters, slogans, images, and the like. Propaganda has always been an important communicative tool for the CCP (Landsberger 2001; Donald & Evans 1999). Post-reform changes and globalisation-led media changes may challenge the appeal of propaganda posters, yet, as Landsberger writes:

the central party and state apparatus is still committed to the use of posters, and, as a result, posters remain omnipresent in Chinese life. (Landsberger 2001:543)

During our field trip in November 2007, we collected a wide range of propaganda posters found in city streets and subway stations in Beijing. As we will show, the discourses that emerge from the posters reveal something more complex than simply persuading the public to support the Games: they are embedded in wider discourses on citizenship and urban planning. More specifically, three discourses have been identified through our analysis of the posters: 1) the discourse of a modern civilised citizen; 2) the discourse of harmonious coexistence; and 3) the discourse of Beijing “going global”.

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<sup>3</sup> The role of the IOC in the organisation of the BOG requires further study. The IOC has been criticised for its highly undemocratic, hierarchical structure – resembling, ironically, that of the CCP. Membership in the IOC is by invitation, and elites such as princes are highly favoured. At the same time, in order to underline its apolitical or suprapolitical nature, the IOC has banned the wearing of any politically charged symbol during the Olympic Games by sportsmen, claiming rather naively that the Games are essentially a sports and not a political event (see IOC 2007:16). For a discussion of the non-democratic structure of the IOC see Close et al. 2007:32-35.

## The Discourse of a Modern Civilised Citizen

The discourse of a modern civilised citizen is the most salient one. This discourse summons the citizens to behave well in public and to embrace the BOG with complete devotion. The slogan “Welcoming the Olympics, Stressing civilisation, Establishing a new trend” (*ying Aoyun jiang wenming shu xinfeng*) frequently appears on the promotional materials, reminding the public of the duties and obligations of a Chinese citizen.

“Good manners” is one of the key terms in the discourse of the modern civilised citizen. Assuming the voice of a patriarchal head of a family, the promotional materials urge the citizens to behave themselves, otherwise the nation, the ultimate family, will lose face. To quote Landsberger, “The moral education of the people has been viewed historically as a function of good government in China” (2001:541). The authorities want to show a population of well-disciplined citizens who internalise the rules of good manners and behave well, especially during the BOG. In BOCOG’s volunteer guide (BOGVWCG 2007), a whole chapter, “Volunteering Skills”, is devoted to social manners. According to the chapter, “Manners are a reflection of a person’s education and character, enhancing all human relationships” (ibid.:147) and “Olympic volunteers are ambassadors of the BOG and will mirror and reflect China” (ibid.). The volunteer thus carries the burden of representing the entire nation and his/her good manners are expected.

The chapter goes on to present a set of “rules” on basic social customs, postures, communication manners, and taboos, as if Chinese citizens have no knowledge of social customs. It begins with some “basic” rules, giving priority to 1) fine image, 2) appropriate attitude, 3) respect for others, 4) kind acceptance, 5) respect for privacy, 6) being honest, 7) appropriate relationships, and 8) ladies first. Then, on postures, it discusses 1) sitting, 2) standing, and 3) walking. Each posture is accompanied by a detailed description of “proper” postures and a list of “avoid” items in which bracketed descriptions such as “Low-class and boorish”, “Cocky and impolite”, “Underbred”, “Too easygoing”, etc. are added to emphasise the level of disgrace. After a subsequent description on communication manners, such as shaking hands and how to conduct normal and telephone conversations, a final section is devoted to a substantial list of “taboos”. It starts with some general rules, followed by taboos regarding colours, numbers, foods and drinks, and gifts. This section gives special attention to

different cultural and religious practices, “informing” the readers that the world is bigger than the “West” and even the “West” is not homogenous, just as there are people with different religions. A news report showed that the BOCOG has arranged for media workers to observe a stringent training on “manners”. Official trainers revealed the secret formula of “the best smile”, which should reveal between six and eight teeth, not more, not less. A female trainee told reporters about the hardship they went through:

We have to wear high heels and stand with chopsticks in our mouths, books on our heads and paper between our knees. It is really tiring. (Beattie 2008)

To further strengthen and historicise the importance of good manners, Confucius is constantly mobilised. In the volunteer manual, we read for instance the following well-known Confucian sayings: “One who has manners is one who respects others” (BOGVWCG 2007:147); “How very glad we are to welcome friends from afar” (ibid.:148); and “Ask about taboos when entering another territory; ask about customs when going to another country; ask about unmentionables when visiting a family” (ibid.:153). To bring in such traditional Confucian sayings is to remind the readers of their alleged long and rich history and therefore present the Games as the guardian of “a modern China, a product of 5000 years of civilization and history” (ibid.:69).

In an attempt to foreground the importance of good manners, promotional materials regularly assume citizens’ misbehaviour in public, which therefore requires correction and civilisation. Among numerous such materials concerning public transport, one billboard poster in a subway station (Figure 1) uses a discipline-or-punish tone to urge passengers to line up properly. An officer in a well-tailored uniform is placed in the centre, with two orderly queues at both sides. His authority is made explicit, first and foremost, by his centrality in this poster and by his posture – left arm raised as if pointing to some mischievous kids. The passengers listen to him. The strong sense of “discipline” and “order” depicted in the image is, however, translated into a message of “safety” in the slogan, which says “Wait safely, queue up [lit: “get on the train”] in order” (*anquan houche, youxu chengzuo*).

Other similar posters urge citizens to step out of the bus properly (*shunxu xiache*), to pay when using public transport (*wenming shuaka*), or to keep an appropriate distance, that is, one metre, behind people withdrawing money from the ATM machine (*yi mi de chaju*), all assuming that Chinese citizens are doing

Figure 1 *Queue Up in Order*



Photo: Gladys Pak Lei Chong.

otherwise in order to promote “civilised behaviour” (*wenming xingwei*).

Apart from insisting on good manners in public space, such materials also offer more direct messages regarding the Games, encouraging citizens to actively support and endorse Beijing’s hosting of the Olympics. To be a volunteer for the BOG is the most explicit way of acknowledging one’s civic duty and embracing this national undertaking passionately. Figure 2 shows a poster with texts in both Chinese and English, catering probably not only to English-speaking viewers but also to a more cosmopolitan imagery. The message of this image seems clear: to participate in the BOG is to serve the country. The background of this image is a male figure wearing a white t-shirt with the BOG emblem on it. His hand is placed over his heart, the centre of the picture, forming a gesture of loyalty and

Figure 2 Recruiting Volunteers for the BOG



Photo: Gladys Pak Lei Chong.

dedication to his fatherland and the Games. The English text strengthens the message by claiming the wide support: “As many as 70,000 volunteers would be needed for the Olympic Games and another 30,000 for the Paralympics”.

Conflated with this call for civic duty and active participation is an imagery of children, youth, and the future of the nation. Like the image on the left in Figure 2, many other posters depict children, energetic and cheerful, innocent and bright. Such images are a visual suggestion that the Games are embraced by the younger generation and that their commitment will translate into a promising future for the PRC. As one slogan says, “Children bear our hopes for the future, the future of this Olympic city rests on their shoulders” (*haizi shi mingtian, shi xiwang, zhezuo Aoyun zhi cheng de weilai zheng danzai tamen jian*

*shang*). When posters specifically target China's youth, these youth are invariably asked to become volunteers. Slogans such as "Welcome the Olympics, Stressing civilisation, Establishing a new trend" are followed by the line "I participate, I contribute, I am happy" (*wo canyu, wo fengxian, wo kuaile*) and "I participate in the Olympics too" (*Aoyun you wo yige*). But, as many posters state, "to be a volunteer is to set an example for the public" (*Aoyun xianfeng*).

Figure 3 Welcoming the Olympics



Photo: Gladys Pak Lei Chong.

As Figure 3 shows, aesthetics known from the Cultural Revolution are invoked to emphasise the contribution of the Games to China's civilisation. This billboard poster, found in Beijing's Wudaokou area, also employs the slogans "Welcoming the Olympics, Stressing Civilisation, Establishing a new trend" and, again, "I participate, I contribute, I am happy". The second slogan, emphasising citizens'

individual commitment, is printed in a much larger font size, highlighting the civic duties of the “I” that represents the PRC. The call to civic duty is reinforced by the national flag of the PRC as well as by a constellation of Chinese people holding the national flags and cheering for something great – the BOG, with its emblems on the top right hand corner.

Figure 4 *Olympics, AIDS, and Campus Life*



Photo: Gladys Pak Lei Chong.

In addition to showing good manners, building a bright future, and fulfilling one’s civic duties, the discourse of a modern civilised citizen manifests itself in almost every possible dimension of modern life in China. For instance, a board sign message which says “Avoid Fire, Safe Olympics” (*quzhu huohuan ping’an Aoyun*) is found in almost every residential complex, usually next to the elevators or the entrance of the building. A banner in Yonghegong subway station says

“Everyone be vigilant of fire safety, we make a safe Olympics” (*renren guanzhu xiaofang gongzhu ping’an Aoyun*), and yet another poster states “Humanistic Olympics, Law and Order” (*renwen Aoyun fazhi tongxing*).

One of the more striking examples comes from a banner informing students and teachers at Beijing University about a seminar on AIDS. It starts with “Welcome the Olympics, Prevent AIDS, Build a harmonious campus” (*yingjie Aoyunhui, yufang aizibing, gongjian hexie xiaoyuan*). Three seemingly unrelated responsibilities and aspects – the Games, AIDS, and campus life – are brought together to articulate and construct one common identity: the Chinese as modern civilised citizens.

### The Discourse of Harmonious Coexistence

The discourse of harmonious coexistence is, first and foremost, enshrined in the theme slogan of the BOG – “One World, One Dream” (*tong yige shijie, tong yige mengxiang*) – a slogan promoting the very idea of harmonious coexistence despite differences. This discourse is put forward in many promotional materials, including that pictured in Figure 5, which carries a very simple but expressive image with five arms of five different colours, substituting for the five rings, joining together to form a variation of the Olympic symbol. According to an explanation given by the IOC, these five colours represent different continents, but no specific colour is designated to a specific continent, supposedly to embody the Olympic ideal, that is, universalism beyond racial disparity or even inequality. Notice that the arms in Figure 5 are not interlocked like the Olympic rings are; rather, they all come together at one point, symbolising the fact that all efforts are being put together for the same goal, that is, the BOG.

If intercontinental harmony is the official Olympic ideology, the harmony BOCOG strives to propagate is both interethnic and intercultural, cast separately in a national and international context. On the ethnic side, the five Olympic mascots are known to be modelled after the assumed traits of major ethnic minorities in China, suggesting a scenario of peaceful coexistence. At the same time, promotional materials often portray Chinese ethnic minorities celebrating and welcoming the BOG, thus reiterating the dominant narrative that acknowledges the differences between minorities and, above all, their shared happiness under Beijing rule.

Turning outward, the discourse of harmonious coexistence also connects “the East” with “the West”, particularly through images of “cultural fusion”.

Figure 5 *One World, One Dream*



Photo: Gladys Pak Lei Chong.

One poster depicts, for example, the performance of the “Three Tenors” at the Forbidden City, a “Western” performance that took place at a Chinese historical site in 2001, signifying a meeting point between “East” and “West”. In another poster (Figure 6), images of a young Beijing boy playing with a football, generally perceived as a Western(-dominated) sport, are juxtaposed with images of a Beijing resident – a senior, of course – doing Tai Chi in a park. Such a juxtaposition

alludes visually to a fusion between the West and the East, while also essentialising assumed cultural differences as much as hinting at a promising future: the young boy will acquire his skills in a modern sport, and the senior citizens will remain the guardians of a traditional sport. By mobilising Orientalistic stereotypes, the poster hence provides a meeting ground for an assumed old tradition of “the East” and the alleged new modernity of “the West”, and the encounter is reassuring.

Figure 6 East Meets West?



Photo: Gladys Pak Lei Chong.

### The Discourse on Beijing “Going Global”

The third discourse that can be teased out of the promotional materials is that Beijing is a city “going global”. One of the key slogans of the BOG is “*Xin Beijing, Xin Aoyun*”, literally “New Beijing, New Olympics”. Why its English

version becomes “New Beijing, Great Olympics” is unclear; probably it would be considered too immodest in China to claim to produce a new Olympics. Suffice to say that by stressing the word “new” in its Chinese slogan, and therefore predominantly to the Chinese people, the BOCOG is aligning itself with a general discourse in China that celebrates the idea of newness (Zhang 2000) and innovation (Keane 2007).

*Figure 7 New Beijing, Great Olympics*



*Photo: Gladys Pak Lei Chong.*

This newness is intricately connected with the global, which is particularly embodied in the new architecture which has arisen in Beijing since it won the bid. New architectural works include the National Theatre, the National Stadium (the Bird's Nest), the National Swim Centre (the Watercube), the International Airport's third terminal, and the controversial China Central Television's (CCTV)

new headquarters, designed by Rem Koolhaas. All of these projects have been designed by global architectural celebrities, whose high-profile designs and star-like status mark the city's desire to become global. For instance, the Bird's Nest, designed by Swiss architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron with the help of Beijing artist and cultural entrepreneur Ai Weiwei,

reveals the ambitions among territorial elites in China to demonstrate the country's rise as an eminent economic and political power on the world stage. (Ren 2008:176)<sup>4</sup>

However, the new globality of the city is not to be divorced from its tradition and history. In the posters, images of old Beijing, signifying the traditional past, are often placed together with images of new Beijing, with these new architectural works signifying a hypermodern future. Figure 7 is a typical example of placing the ancient (the Temple of Heaven) together with the hypermodern (the Bird's Nest). It underlines how the hypermodern is connected to the old – represented by the idea of the Bird's Nest, which in itself constitutes a reference to the past. The template colour is red, a colour used by many Chinese to indicate “auspiciousness” and “happiness”. Red is also the traditional Chinese colour for weddings – in this case the wedding between two different architectural styles, old and new. It should also be noted that the Temple of Heaven is shot from a lower angle, as if the past is something high and grand, deserving our respect, whereas the Bird's Nest is captured from a high angle, thus exuding a sense of closeness, something we can get hold of. In that sense, the discourse of Beijing “going global” goes hand in hand with the discourse of harmonious coexistence, in this case between the East and the West, which will probably be the inevitable outcome of Beijing going global.

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<sup>4</sup> Locally, the construction of these new buildings has led to heated debates among the cultural elites. For instance, Wu Chen, one leading opponent, cynically called Beijing “the laboratory for foreign architects” (in Ren 2008:184, see also Marvin 2008). While the Western background of the architects is contested, sometimes the design itself is also critiqued for being outlandish and unsafe (Brownell 2008:92). “The opposition to the stadium design was part of the larger public debate about what it means to be Chinese and whether anything distinctively ‘Chinese’ will remain as China plunges headfirst into the international community” (ibid.:92). The deliberate involvement of global architects to promote the nation-state thus paradoxically produces a similar nationalistic counter-discourse in China. Interestingly, at a later stage Ai Weiwei distanced himself from the Bird's Nest project while criticising the Beijing Olympics and withdrawing from his involvement (see youtube.com 2007).

## Artful Marketing

So far in our analysis, we have presented officially sanctioned imaginations of the nation-state. By “officially sanctioned”, we have assumed that various parties involved in the production of such imaginations would align themselves into a more or less monolithic apparatus. Given the control of the party over official mediations, this assumption seems justified. However, caution and, especially, more research is needed, first, to dissect the role of the different parties involved – most notably, the central authorities, the Beijing authorities, the BOCOG, media companies, and the IOC – and, second, to study how the citizenry perceives such materials. As Landsberger remarks, “no serious research has been done yet on the reception and/or effectiveness of the posters” (2001:543). At the same time, it should also be noted that even the implicit distinction between the official culture that is being circulated in such promotional materials and the unofficial culture that may present an alternative voice is becoming increasingly problematic (Barmé 1999; Berghuis 2004; Zhang 2007). The binary of the official versus the unofficial has, in the words of Berghuis:

Been in constant flux throughout the 1990s, and the grounds on which the meaning of this binary has been predicated have varied significantly. (Berghuis 2004:714)

The roving Olympics-related exhibition “Sport in Art” provides a prime example of the blurring of boundaries between the official and the unofficial. The exhibition features the works of 71 contemporary Chinese and overseas artists, all created around the theme of humanity and sports.<sup>5</sup> On the cover of the exhibition catalogue are the prominent logo of the Beijing Olympics as well as that of Adidas. Contributors to the catalogue praise the alliance between sport and art, and thank Adidas for making this exhibition possible. For example, Zuo Zhengyao from the Guangzhou Arts College Gallery writes:

Undoubtedly this perfect integration between sports and art facilitates a cohesive impact between sport and vision, and, simply, an unforgettable memory. [...] Here I sincerely extend my thanks to Adidas for providing us such an opportunity to participate in activities associated with the

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<sup>5</sup> The exhibition opened in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Shanghai (MoCA) on 10 November 2007 and will tour Guangzhou, Nanjing, Shenyang, Chengdu and finally arrive in Beijing during the Olympics. Afterwards the artworks will be auctioned in Hong Kong; part of the money will be donated by Adidas to charity.

Olympic Games. (Zuo 2007:9)

Invariably, the contributors commend the assumed humanistic, global appeal of the Beijing Olympics and applaud the combination of the upcoming spectacle with the art world. Fiona Qian from the Museum of Modern Art writes:

Today, Chinese people have experienced delicate but profound changes in their feelings. We ponder on how to understand the world more deeply. Though our own utopias still await our arrival, the Olympic spirit represents humanity's mutual respect and the individual's incessant pursuit of self-perfection. (Qian 2007:11)

Uncritically, a discourse of self-improvement and perfection joins forces with a humanistic and Olympic ideal of cosmopolitanism.

Zooming in on the work of Chinese pop-art artist Wang Guangyi,<sup>6</sup> who combines the imageries known from the Cultural Revolution with signs of mass consumption, such as Coca Cola and, in this case, the Olympics, art historian Ante Glibota writes the following in her essay "Art in the Olympic Hour":

One of Wang Guangyi's characteristics is how he has recreated, quite concretely, the moment of his stylistic choice, and its conflictual character, and in doing so he has influenced and contributed to, an opening, leading to a genuine perspective for the works and an open, modern art, free from all academic tutelage in China. (Glibota 2007:30)

Quite apart from its aesthetic values, it seems art is being celebrated here not only as an authentic expression of a rising modern nation but also as an authenticator itself. While political as well as commercial questions are circumvented, art, as much as sports, is reassigned to a sanitised, depoliticised, and sinicised cultural sphere.

The same essay is also peppered with grandiose Orientalistic statements claiming the uniqueness of the Chinese art world. Glibota writes:

China holds the key to practically all the arts and cultures of the Asian continent. This Chinese civilization, several millennia old, which every knowledgeable connoisseur would describe as refined, has no equal in the history of humankind. (Ibid.:28)

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<sup>6</sup> Significantly, in April 2008, Wang Guangyi pulled out of an upcoming exhibition at a Paris gallery to protest against the events surrounding the torch relay and the French attitude towards the Olympics, an act resonating with the wave of popular nationalism that swept over China following the protests against China's Tibet policies (see Li 2008).

Following on this problematic Sino-centric statement, the author continues:

And so art, through its Chinese characteristics, has provided a worldwide public with its metaphor for a new era of modern expression in the China of the post-Cultural Revolutionary era. (Ibid.:29)

The Olympics, a project launched by the Chinese state to present a revamped yet historically rooted China to the world, is embraced blatantly and unquestioningly by this presumably unofficial exhibition, testifying to the problematic nature of demarcating the unofficial from the official.

Art complex 798, located in north-west Beijing, provides another example of how the official and the unofficial may overlap. In anticipation of the Beijing Olympics, this complex has been undergoing substantial infrastructural improvements so as to make the area the ideal showcase for Beijing as an assumed creative city. As Michael Keane (2007) shows, the cultural industry and related notions of creativity and innovation have become increasingly important policy issues for the party since the turn of the century. The complex is often heralded in the West as representing the cutting edge of China's cultural scene. In a way, it does, with a dazzling array of the artistic nouveau riche of China, amidst cosmopolitan bars, galleries, and high-end bookshops, all located in an old factory complex that grants the area a touch of communist nostalgia. What interests us here is how an unofficial art enclave like 798 is being appropriated as a distinct marker of Beijing as an assumed creative city, coinciding with the image enthusiastically promoted by the authorities. As Keane explains:

Creativity has become a hot topic on the Mainland. Concepts such as creative nation, creative city and creative century are endorsed in policy statements within the Eleventh Five-Year Plans of many Chinese cities. (Keane 2007:2)

Indeed, in 2007, the district was officially labelled Beijing's centre of cultural creative industry. In an Olympic poster which refers directly to 798, claiming it to be the space where art rules, the image of a piece of artwork is combined with an image of a nightclub, serving as corroborative evidence of Beijing as a vibrant, creative city (Figure 8). The self-description of 798 on its website is telling in its mix of commercialism, communist nostalgia, and its eagerness to connect the past with the present and the future (new China!):

798 Space is the center and the biggest space that provide cultural, artistic and commercial activities in the area. It was designed by the East German's architects in the Bauhaus style in the early 1950's. Through the

Figure 8 Art Rules at the Beijing 798 Art Zone



Photo: Gladys Pak Lei Chong.

reconstruction and redesigning with the contemporary aesthetics by artists, the space combines the past, present, and future of the 'New China' and the unique meaning of the socialistic culture. (798 Space 2006)

As early as the 1990s, Geremie Barmé had already pointed out, arguably with an overdose of cynicism, how China's avant-garde was being co-opted by the corporate communism of what he labelled the "Party Inc" (Barmé 1999:253). Upon entering 798, one cannot help noticing how the unofficial domains of global capitalism and art have become major allies in the official promotion of Beijing as an assumed creative city. Nike, for instance, opened a museum displaying "artworks" made of Nike shoes at 798 in 2007; this is a rather remarkable joint venture that is used by the political domain to showcase the alleged rise of a

creative China. Not surprisingly, government officials from all over the world, including the French president Nicolas Sarkozy, are brought to 798, and guided tours are offered to tourists. In the complex, creative industries are located in fancy offices with Apple computers and Japanese-style vending machines. In the galleries, artworks are being sold for phenomenal prices that are listed in Euros or US-Dollars instead of Renminbi. The 798 complex serves as a timely reminder that today it has become impossible to clearly delineate the official from the unofficial; they are as intertwined as the political and the commercial, whether locally, regionally or globally.

In her discussion of contemporary Chinese cinema, Zhang (2007) refers to the tripartite division of film-making taking place during the reconfiguration of the political economics of post-socialism in the age of the World Trade Organization. She observes a constant dialectic between politics (driven by propaganda and domination), capital (driven by profit and domination), and the art world (driven by aesthetics and prestige), with the market, both domestic and overseas, as the central force (Zhang 2007:70-71). She observes:

There have been increasing accommodations and compromises between various players. While politics readjusts its strategic relations to art from all-out domination to sugarcoated co-optation, art may have willingly accommodated politics to such an extent as to be at times entirely complicit with official ideology. (Ibid.:71-72)

A similar process occurs between capital and art when “in some cases the lure of prestige and profit sharing has compelled art to accommodate capital” (ibid.:72). Our analysis of “Sport in Art” as well as 798 shows that, indeed, in the contemporary Chinese art world, co-optation and complicity are central. The eagerness with which the official imageries surrounding the BOG are reproduced in an unofficial art event and unofficial art complex is indicative of the alliances forged between global capital, local politics, and the art world. This tripartite force produces a discourse of Beijing as an upcoming creative global city hosting one of the biggest global spectacles, which is of course also one of the tactics the nation-state uses to maintain itself.

### **One World, One Dream?**

That the Olympic Games serve as an ongoing and indispensable project of (symbolic) nation-state maintenance is evident. The question remains: How effective is this project? As pointed out by Shohat and Stam, communication and

culture, including propaganda, involve “an act of contextualized interlocution between socially situated producers and receivers” (Shohat & Stam 1995:180). In other words, the ideological messages encoded in the promotional materials surrounding the Games may well be read or decoded in very different ways by the receivers. Take, for example, the blogs of cultural critic Wang Xiaofeng, in which he ridicules the attempts of the authorities to impose “good manners” on the Beijingers and force them to speak standard Mandarin instead of the Beijing dialect. Land rights activist Yang Chunlin proclaimed that what the Chinese want is not the Olympics, but human rights. His petition, triggered by a land dispute, was signed by 10,000 villagers (Coonan 2008). Such voices attest to a Chinese mediascape that is, partly due to the impact of new technologies, gradually opening up. As Landsberger remarks, the control of the party over the media is anything but complete:

The party’s posters and other representations must now compete with a flood of other voices and images, not only those created by and for the market, but also those produced by and for the people themselves, as the flow of images and information on the Internet indicates. (Landsberger 2001:542)

Yet, the subsequent prosecution and imprisonment of Yang Chunlin betrays the persistent dangers involved in speaking out too loudly against the party line.

Apart from voices within China that contest the Olympics, global media reports frame the Olympics in terms that do not only differ from but also wrestle with the promotion by the Chinese authorities. In analysing the abundance of news reports appearing worldwide in relation to the Beijing Olympics, we have located a few major themes: Beijing as a hypermodern city; the stringent control with which urban planning, citizens, and sportsmen are confronted; human rights; the Tibet issue; China’s international policies; the assumed pollution of China and in particular Beijing; the forced removals due to the building of the Olympic premises; and the labour conditions of migrant workers. When Steven Spielberg withdrew his cooperation from the staging of the opening and closing ceremonies in mid-February 2008 because of the Darfur issue, his decision was received positively in Western media. In China, however, his choice was heavily criticised. *China Daily* columnist Kang Bing blamed Western media for portraying only the negative side of China:

So far as some media are concerned, we find we can do nothing right. ‘You are wrong’ is their mentality and that’s their universal conclusion

whatever you do or don't do, a press official of the Organizing Committee of the Beijing Olympic Games said to me recently [...] Beijing has kept its promise to the IOC on press freedom, but some media seem to be asking the host to adopt freedom and democracy according to their understanding and explanation. When not satisfied, they threaten to call for a boycott of the Games. (Kang 2008)

Ironically, a discourse that critiques China for its human rights and international policies backfires when we observe the response in China. A narrative of (self-) victimisation is channelled to the audience, together with other performative national humiliation discourses (see Callahan 2006), constituting a means of identification against the assumed Western "media hegemony". According to an online survey by Global Times, 82 percent of Chinese respondents believe Western pressure was due to political prejudice against China (Fan 2008). After Spielberg's pullout, many Chinese were reported by *Washington Post* to be "[rallying] around the government against the foreign criticism" (ibid.).

In the Netherlands, where the authors of this paper are currently based, debate heated up at the beginning of 2008, when a Dutch comedian published a call to sportsmen to boycott the Beijing Olympics. Together with other comedians he has recorded a song titled "Don't go to China" (*Nie Na China*), in which a harsh critique of China's human rights situation is combined with a carnivalesque sound. When the clip of this song was shown to students in Shanghai, they univocally expressed their shock and discontent. Xu, a 24-year-old student, explained, "they don't understand a thing of China, nothing of the lyrics is true. Why would they sing this? I am flabbergasted" (Kotanis 2008:12). Flora, a Fudan University student, expressed her worries over such actions, pointing to potential financial consequences:

I do not want to offend anyone, but the Chinese believe Europeans know very little of China. Then you get this kind of songs. I am quite worried, if our image in The Netherlands is that bad, won't this affect our economic ties?. (Ibid.)

Inadvertently, oppositional discourses surrounding the BOG that emerge in the Western media have the ironic effect of strengthening nationalistic discourse, alienating the Chinese citizens from the global media, and reifying assumed cultural differences. The same can be observed in the incidents surrounding the torch relay in April 2008. Pro-Tibet activists featured prominently in Western media reports, not only instigating heated debates in several Western countries

Figure 9 Protest in US Against CNN's Reporting on China, 20 April 2008



Photo: Jin Hui.

on whether or not political leaders should join the opening ceremony, but also simultaneously stirring up strong anti-Western sentiments in China and among overseas Chinese (Figure 9). The protests seem to have pushed the spectacle further and further away from the Olympic ideals of harmony and cultural exchange, mutual respect, and understanding. The idea of “One World, One Dream” has become almost a shadow of itself. The current proliferation of an antagonistic discourse in which the alleged “West” and “China” are framed as each others’ opposites, in which both media and people withdraw into cultural fortresses, undermines the potential the Olympics hold for a more cosmopolitan worldview in which cultural differences are at most arbitrary and temporary.

In China, the continuous flow of criticism from the West is read, understandably, as yet another case of Western cultural imperialism, confronting China once again with the question of how to present itself to the world. In the most

thoughtful and nuanced book written on the Beijing Olympics so far, Susan Brownell rightfully critiques the implicit assumption in Western media reports that China is ruled by one monolithic Communist Party. She also takes issue with the imperialist and colonialist arrogance of the West (Brownell 2008:2-6). She writes:

The assumption in the West seems to be that any cultural exchange with China should be a one-way exchange in which China learns from the West, not a two-way dialogue. (Ibid.:2)

In addition to thinking about what the Olympics can do for China, it may be equally if not more interesting, Brownell argues, to pose the question of what China can do for the Olympics. In any case, what is interesting to our current analysis is that the oppositional discourse circulated in the Western media in conjunction with the BOG is contributing to the Chinese nation-state's ongoing project of maintaining and legitimising itself. This particular trajectory of national maintenance may be more circuitous than the straightforward exercise launched by official promotion, and it does not function in the same way as the co-optation of the art world. Nonetheless, these three components testify to the dynamic nature of a national maintenance project: planned perhaps, but never predictable; official perhaps, but never entirely; for the nation perhaps, but never confined to the nation.

The official promotion of Chineseness, as analysed in this paper, inevitably involves different ideological discourses, which will be celebrated, appropriated, and/or contested both within and outside China. The current global proliferation of the discourse of human rights indicates that the power of the Chinese authorities to control the global imagination of China remains limited. The Beijing Olympics will be a global media spectacle. In particular, television and the Internet will serve as the primary stages on which the battle over Chineseness will take place. The Games will generate a cacophony of discourses; some voices will be heard, others silenced. Judging from the eagerness with which Western media report on the Tibet protests surrounding the torch relay – protests that are likely to continue until the actual Games – it is safe to claim that neither the CCP nor the BOCOG are uncontestedly alone in the production of the Beijing Olympics as a global media spectacle. Whereas some claim the Olympics to be a moment that holds the potential to “bring the end of a closed and repressive order” (deLisle 2008:55), a statement that betrays a simplistic and US-centric view on China's complex political realities, the current proliferation of an an-

tagonistic discourse between “China” and “the West” forebodes a more gloomy and regressive spectacle in which assumed cultural differences will continue to be reified, locking people up into cultural enclaves – as imagined as that they are real.

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