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Sharing the dream: The opening ceremonies of Beijing

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One World, One Dream.

You and me, we are of one family;

You and me, we are creating a bright future.

“Dream” (2008 Olympic song)

The Olympic slogan “One World, One Dream” is all over the cityscape of Beijing. Large advertisements of Chinese athletes are plastered throughout the expanding subway infrastructure. Red national flags hang in every *hutong* (the rapidly vanishing alleyways of traditional courtyard domestic life), high-rise apartment complex, and far-flung suburb. Gigantic televisions in Tiananmen Square, the Summer Palace, public parks, and shopping areas are poised to broadcast Zhang Yimou’s opening ceremonies to the outdoor crowds, accustomed to hot August nights. Thousands of blue-uniformed Olympic volunteers stationed at every Olympic venue, tourist site, and subway station give directions to Chinese and foreign tourists.

In addition to the multitudes of blue-shirted Olympic volunteers, the layers of security include the Beijing police, the People’s Liberation Army, overhead helicopters, and neighborhood watchmen who imbue the Olympic brand with an aura of civic protectionism and state surveillance. There is no-translation-required for the “do not f*** with” label attached to these games. Through the *guanxi* (“connections”) of an Ivy-League, student-run fellowship, I am on my way to the opening ceremonies. IMUSE (Initiating Mutual Understanding Through Student Exchange) received corporate donations from official Olympic sponsors Lenovo, Air China, and Kodak, but tickets to the opening ceremonies was an unexpected coup for its administrators.

It’s an even calendar day, and therefore my host family’s vehicle is ordered off the road along with all other odd-plated privately owned cars. The central government, under the promise to deliver a high-tech, “green” Olympics, closed down factories, expanded public transportation, and seeded clouds to encourage rainfall. And the air of Beijing is noticeably improved according to one of the IMUSE fellows, here on a return visit. Before gaining entry to the new Olympic subway line, we are warned not to bring in “flags of non-Olympic and Paralympic participating countries or

regions” no lighters, lasers, crossbows, fireworks, radioactive or corrosive substances. Soon we are in long cues of Yangling beer executives and their families waiting to get photographed, provide identification, and get the airport-security-style wandering treatment. A sign in Chinese is accompanied by the following English translation: “The ticket system for Beijing Olympics will be real-name verified by dint of the Electronic Recognition Technology and the following precautions are helpful for your smooth pass: . . . face directly the machine and look at the screen rather than staring at your ticket . . . be natural . . . clear up your hair, please.”

A poster featuring an unofficial portrait of the Bird’s Nest purchased from Beijing’s trendy 798 Art District is thoroughly checked for subversive potential. I am allowed to keep it. I have already seen a truck full of cash under rifle-toting Chinese security disappear from view so fast that you would have thought there was a secret network of underground pneumatic tubing. If security is largely a performative exercise, then the aura around the Olympic city is possibly the most impressive example of any government’s ideological “war on terror.” Recognizing that I will soon be nested with three generations of Bushes, the specter of Richard Nixon in the person of Henry Kissinger, Vladimir Putin, and President and General Secretary of China, Hu Jintao, I have reason to be personally reassured by the security apparatus though paradoxically opposed to the elaborate panopticon of governmental surveillance.

The tense international media sphere preceding the Games, including the crack-down in Tibet, the controversial torch run, the Sichuan earthquake crisis, the independence movements of Taiwan and Uighers in Xinjiang, and Stephen Spielberg’s withdrawal from the opening ceremony seems remote from the throngs of celebrating Beijingers. The choice of Spielberg by the Beijing Organizing Committee had reflected China’s desire for acceptance and *guanxi* with the U.S. entertainment industry and a sign of China’s nascent willingness to adopt western approaches to intellectual property rights. When Spielberg declined to deliver the opening ceremonies in response to actress Mia Farrow and son’s (2007) charge of a “Genocide Olympics” based on China’s petro-relations with the government of Sudan, Chinese citizens were urged to boycott Dreamworks’ (Spielberg’s production company) 2008 summer release, *Kung Fu Panda*. While I squirmed watching the film’s predictable Orientalism before walking out, my sixteen-year old Chinese host praised the production and lamented that China’s animation industry was still far from producing such a film.

Beijing’s tenure as the torchbearer of the Olympic movement, displays the fierce protectiveness of the Olympic brand. At the Silk Street Pearl Market, under the marquis of “One Dream, One Shopping Paradise,” one can haggle over knock-off Donna Karan, Tommy Hilfiger, Louis Vuitton, Lacoste, and Chanel clothing. There is a corner set aside for Olympic merchandise where prices are set and strict electronic controls are set in place to track every *fuwa* (the Olympic mascots) baseball cap, coin, and T-shirt of the Beijing games.

A short walk through the embassy district from the Pearl Market to Ritan park, an officially sanctioned protest zone, displays a sign declaring: “Welcome Olympic

games with joyfulness and construct a harmonious society.” There are no protestors but the verdant park is buzzing with the activities of Beijingers of all ages playing ping-pong, using gymnastic apparati, climbing walls, and practicing martial arts. Reviving familiar Cold War rhetoric previously aimed at the now-defunct Soviet and East German Olympic programs, western media sources have focused on China’s elite sporting practices (Project 119)¹, its illegal trafficking in performance enhancing substances (Operation Raw Deal)², and its presumably brainwashed masses who will, sooner or later, usurp the Olympic medal count perhaps for good. Obscured in this discourse are the multigenerational masses of ordinary Beijing citizens occupying public spaces with their gigantic dance parties, little dogs (whose popularity is partly attributed to China’s “One Child” policy), and hacky sacks. These multitudes of ordinary citizens who strove to catch a glimpse of the torch run through the city do not seem to resent their inability to approach the Olympic Green’s architectural splendors nor the endless transportation inconveniences imposed upon them.

But the Beijing Olympics have offered other governments similarly invested in national bodies, wars on terror, and the pursuit of raw materials, a convenient scapegoat. Criticism of the current Bush administration in terms of constitutional violations, anti-Muslim extremism, environmental degradation, and high-level corruption, can be deflected somewhat by invoking the Chinese example. Such deflections are most effective as long as stereotypical views of Chinese people remain intact within western media discourses. Such discourses operate by making the Chinese the overwhelmingly alien “other,” rarely seen as individuals, seemingly incapable of independent thought.

“We all look the same,” jokes Evan, the Michigan resident Harvard student who is serving as one of two American administrators of the IMUSE program. Like one of the five Fuwa, Evan is asked to have his picture taken repeatedly by curious Chinese as we wander through the secured Olympic green zone. It is an amusing reversal of racial mascotism and misrecognition as he is sometimes asked whether or not he is a famous American movie star such as Tom Hanks. Despite the influx of foreign visitors and the “multiculturalism” that imbues the Olympic location, Evan’s European descent remains a curiosity to be photographed.

While there are 56 identified ethnic groups in the People’s Republic, the Han Chinese make up over 90% of the total population which exceeds one billion people; yet the total population of *shaoshuminzu* (national minorities) is substantial at over 100 million who occupy 70% of the land mass of China, according to the 2000 national census (Sofield & Li, 2007). China’s multicultural racial politics is complicated by the sensitivity of particular areas of minority majorities that threaten China’s sovereignty, most notably, Tibet and Xinjiang. Unlike the racial politics currently on display in the United States, the Han leadership can point out the ascendance of two racial minorities in the Chinese imperial past, namely the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) founded by Mongolian Kublai Khan and the Qing dynasty which began in 1644 when Manchurians captured Beijing and ended in 1912 with the overthrow

of the “Last Emperor,” Pu Yi. In advance of the opening ceremonies, performances by dance groups identified on super-screens as the “Xinjiang Song and Dance Troupe” and the “Tibet Theatrical Company” perform traditional dances, but like the Louis Vuitton at the Pearl Market, a skepticism about the “authenticity” of these dance troupes finds affinity in the forthcoming *New York Times* story that uncovers the story of Han children representing China’s 55 minority groups (Lee, 2008).

These racial discourses concerning mascotism, authenticity, and “minority face” spectacles, while familiar to U.S. sport scholars, are akin to glancing into a fun-house mirror. One significant difference is the absence of the notion of “racial castration” (Eng, 2000) in the Chinese context. While the Organization of Chinese Americans condemned the slant-eyed promotional advertisements performed by the Spanish basketball team, few Chinese expressed concern or anger over the pictures. Perhaps the Han Chinese, whose confidence stems from an intact, although plundered cultural heritage, and separate from the humiliations experienced by Asian Americans as “strangers from a different shore” (Takaki, 1989), have not really been waiting for the Opening Ceremonies to mark their rightful place among the superpowers. Rather, the procession of nations under the 204 National Olympic committees provided an opportunity for Chinese spectators to signal an understanding of internationalism.

“Sports,” wrote historian Xu Guoqi, “and the Olympics in particular, show well how nationalism and internationalism come together in China: Chinese participation and interest in modern sports are largely motivated by nationalism, but by importing sports from the West and taking part in world competitions, China has also engaged the world community” (2008, p. 3). Hearty cheers greet nations presently or formerly under U.S. occupation (Afghanistan, Iraq, Cuba) and those nations such as Venezuela that have countered U.S. versions of petropolicy. Official delegations with large ethnic Chinese contingents, “Chinese Taipei” and Hong Kong, also receive the crowd’s approval. European nations that provide destination travel and luxury goods for the elite Chinese crowd are also well-received, particularly when they are accompanied by international tennis celebrities such as Roger Federer and Raphael Nadal.

The nation of Pakistan, as the first foreign respondent to the Sichuan earthquake crisis provides an occasion for an emotional outpouring that culminates with the entry of the Chinese national team led by nine-year old Chinese primary student Lin Hao, a rescuer of two classmates, accompanied by the towering figure of flag-bearer Yao Ming. The earthquake tragedy itself functioned as a rescuer of sorts, as western media outlets turned their attention away from China’s human rights record to China’s humanitarian crisis and national coming together.

Chinese preparation for the Beijing games included a “no spitting” policy, an official cheer (roughly translatable as “Go China! Add oil!”), and efforts to avoid ugly anti-Japanese sentiment that had previously marred international soccer matches. As a result, no team delegations are booed; instead a distinct murmuring of the crowd attends the arrival of the United States and communist outliers such as Viet Nam.

When the large screen television flashed an image of National Basketball Association (NBA) star Kobe Bryant, the murmuring that began with the entry of the flag-bearer and Darfurian “Lost Boy” Lopez Lomong, suddenly shifted into ecstatic cheering. In this instance, the success of the NBA’s global marketing strategies in Asia is apparent and almost recalls Richard M. Nixon’s (1967, p. 123) curious observation that prefigured the pragmatism of “Ping-Pong diplomacy” with Premier Zhou En Lai: “Dealing with Red China is something like trying to cope with the more explosive ghetto elements in our own country. In each case a potentially destructive force has to be curbed; in each case an outlaw element has to be brought within the law; in each case dialogues have to be opened; in each case aggression has to be restrained while education proceeds; and, not least, in neither case can we afford to let those now self-exiled from society stay exiled forever.” While China’s efforts to gain the Olympics can be traced to 1908, the presence of Henry Kissinger at the opening ceremonies and the murmuring attending the Viet Nam contingent recalls a much more recent history of shared superpower status and mutual investments in state surveillance through Olympism and racial ideology. Whether China—or the United States—can move outside the shadow of that history and into a truly new era of international cooperation will depend on much more than a well orchestrated international party. Nevertheless, China has certainly achieved that much.

Notes

1. Project 119 correlates to the number of gold medals (at the time of the Sydney 2000 games) available in the medal-rich disciplines of rowing, sailing, canoeing, kayaking, swimming, and track and field. Western media reports have configured Project 119 as a successor to the militarized Soviet athletic model of “embodied communist threats” (Cole, 2002 p. 231).

2. The eighteen month joint U.S.—China sting operation conducted raids and arrests at steroid production labs and led to the indictment of Chinese pharmaceutical corporation Genescience for the illegal distribution of synthetic human growth hormone (Tucker 2007, September 26). Media narratives of Operation Raw Deal celebrated the rehabilitation of China as newly cooperative with the War on Drugs along with encouraging narratives of coordination among the U.S. agencies (D.E.A., F.B.I., I.R.S., F.D.A., I.N.S.) that comprise a post 9/11 consolidation of Wars on Drugs and Terror.

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