

## Emaciated Chineseness

### --- A Semiotic Analysis of How China Is Visually Translated at the Opening Ceremony of the 29<sup>th</sup> Summer Olympics

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#### Abstract

This paper proposes to examine how China was presented at the opening ceremony of the 29<sup>th</sup> Olympic Games. To showcase China to the rest of the world was one of the objectives of the opening ceremony but it had to be done in such a way that the main course of the Olympic narrative would not be much affected – a constraint which greatly reduced the Chineseness of the event. Secondly, selecting symbols of China for the grand occasion was itself a process that would emaciate the whole way of life called Chinese culture. This was complicated by the fact the director and his team had the moral obligations to counter the Orientalist discourse when the Olympic Games were held in their own country.

**Keywords:** Semiotic analysis, Cultural translation, Beijing Olympics, Chinese culture

#### 1. Introduction

The 29<sup>th</sup> Summer Olympic Games finally took place in Beijing between August 8 and 24, 2008 despite continuous efforts from some quarters of the world to prevent it from happening up to the last minute. For its part, the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games (BOCOG) had been explaining all along to the unconvinced that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) made the right decision to grant China the right to host the mega-event only the third time outside the West in the history of modern Olympics. Given the fact over 4 billion people around the world were expected to watch the opening ceremony of the 29<sup>th</sup> Olympic Games, the organizers certainly wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to speak directly to the massive global audience about the distinctive culture of the host country and its importance to the world community.

#### 2. Major Themes

##### 2.1 National Unity

This, of course, is not to say that the opening ceremony was all about China trying to stage its cultural identity in front of other nations, especially the West, because a huge portion of that global audience were Chinese viewers who had pressing issues of their own that had to be addressed such as national unity, continuation of the modernization drive, and environmental protection. The theme of national unity, for example, was made very clear in an earlier statement issued by BOCOG:

BOCOG's general goal is to host high-level Olympic Games and high-level Olympics with distinguishing features, [in particular] Chinese style, cultural splendour, contemporary spirits and mass participation. The Beijing Olympic Games will be a perfect occasion to fully display China's 5,000 year history and its resplendent culture, a grand ceremony that will gather athletes from all over the world and present diverse and brilliant cultures. The Beijing Olympic Games will fully express the common aspiration of the Chinese people to jointly seek peace, development and common progress together with the peoples of the world, and it will highlight the fact that the 1.3 billion Chinese people of 56 ethnic groups, along with 50 million overseas Chinese, are all most enthusiastic participants in the Beijing Olympic Games. (Quoted in Close et al, 2007, p. 15)

And not surprisingly, at the beginning of the opening ceremony of the 29<sup>th</sup> Olympic Games, what the audience saw was 56 children clad in the outfits of China's 56 ethnic groups carrying their national flag into the Bird's Nest Stadium.



The children then sang their national anthem as the Chinese flag was being raised, illustrating the spirit of unity under one nation much the same way as a black soldier saluting the triple-colored French flag described by Roland Barthes in one of his books on cultural semiotics. (1972, p. 115)

### *2.2 The Glamor of High-tech*

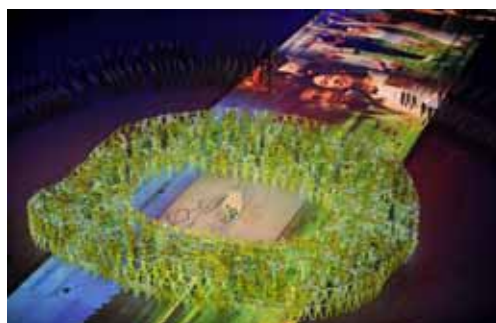
Another theme which characterized the opening ceremony of the 29<sup>th</sup> Summer Olympics was the organizers' emphasis on high-tech. The point was largely missed or overlooked by the Western media because it was directed at the domestic audience who knew very well the importance of science and technology to its survival in the modern world. Beginning with the Opium War in 1840, China has experienced a series of defeats and humiliations at the hand of foreign powers who possessed superior scientific knowledge and technical know-how. In order not to repeat its painful history of being a "semi-colony", China has been trying hard to catch up with the Western world and Japan in the area of science and technology which forms the core of its modernization drive. This one-and-half-century long Chinese obsession clearly found its way into the design and execution of the opening ceremony of the 29<sup>th</sup> Olympic Games. It could be safely said that the lighting and staging technology used at the event was among the most sophisticated in the history of the Olympic Games. At the center of the stadium was a 147 m by 27 m LED screen, on which the entire history of the Chinese civilization was displayed. There was also a 36-m long by 30-m wide structure, with multiple separate elevated platforms that could be used for different performances simultaneously or in succession to one another. The climax of the modernization-through-science theme came when, toward the end of the performance, three astronauts flew through the stadium.



Earlier in the same year, China successfully sent three men into space and announced its intention to dispatch the first Chinese onto the moon in the next few decades. This is one more indication that China is determined to continue its modernization drive and endeavors to become a global leader in science and technology.

### *2.3 A Green Event*

To make the 2008 Olympic event a "green" one was a promise that the organizers had made to the world and their own countrymen. This theme of environmental protection found its accentuated manifestation in the color of the green costumes that hundreds of dancers wore in the second last section of the performance. Even the bird's nest within the Bird's Nest was presented in green color so that it matches the environmentally conscious design of the whole Olympic Village such as the use of solar power for some apartments and an advanced rainwater recycling system in the main stadium.



The segment concluded with the huge scroll showing the beautiful pictures drawn by dozens of smiling school pupils, expressing humanity's common wish for a more natural and healthier environment to live in.

#### 2.4 A Gala with Chinese Characteristics

Parallel to advanced science and technology and environmental protection is the theme of *renwen aoyun* (人文奥运), a Chinese term which is loosely used in different contexts and often causes misunderstanding by non-native speakers. The following is professor Susan Brownell's explanation of the concept:

*renwen aoyun* is difficult to translate into English here. Normally the translation for the academic word "humanities", it is formed of the characters for *ren*, "human," and *wen*, "writing, literary pursuits, culture." When it was bidding for the Olympic Games in 2001, the Beijing Olympic Games Bid Committee (BOBICO) emphasized that a central characteristic of Chinese culture is the importance it places on human beings, a tradition as strong and as ancient as the Western humanism that undergirds the philosophy of Olympism. ... One of the strategic reasons for the choice of this theme was to counteract the accusations of the lack of human rights in China with an image of a people-centered Olympic Games. But its main function is domestic: it provides the orientation for the intense focus on the training and cultivation of the next generation of Chinese people through "Olympic Education." In that sense, it will be a "people's Olympics" on a scale never seen before. (2008, pp. 5-6)

For those who know the historical situation well, it is not difficult to see from the above quote that the BOBICO was overstretching the concept of *renwen* a little bit to cope with the external pressure for China to improve its human rights. As is pointed out by professor Brownell, one of the normal interpretations of the term is "culture" and by describing the proposed event as *renwen aoyun*, the organizers actually wanted to sponsor an Olympic event "with distinguishing features, [in particular] Chinese style". When pressed, one could certainly say that one of the distinguishing features of Chinese culture is its concern for people, but that is not what the organizers had in mind when they proposed those three grand themes for the upcoming Olympic Games. Professor Brownell was thus misled to translate the term into "people's Olympics" as opposed to "culturally-unique Olympics".

The uniqueness of culture, of course, lies in "China's 5,000 year history" which the organizers wanted to "fully display" at the opening ceremony of the 29<sup>th</sup> Summer Olympic Games. For an extended period of time, that is, from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the notorious Cultural Revolution which ended in the late 1970s, there was a general mood in China to completely break away from its "feudal past" in the nation's maddening drive toward modernity. After 100 years of struggle, especially after the last 30 years of reform and opening to the outside world which has produced considerable wealth and prosperity for its 1.3 billion population, China is now seeking to reestablish links with its past which has made the country what it is today. In other words, China now considers itself as belonging to an alternative tradition in relation to Western culture which has dominated the Olympic Games in the past. Theoretically speaking, the 29<sup>th</sup> Olympics were supposed to be an occasion for cultural exchange and the improvement of international understanding which is part of the Olympic Movement for world peace through sport, and the organizers certainly wanted to take this opportunity to convey to the world that, different as it is, Chinese culture has much to contribute to the totality of human civilization, hence another line of symbolism that ran through the opening ceremony.

##### 2.4.1 External Constraints

Culture, as Raymond Williams put it, is "a whole way of life" (1958, p. XVIII) which overlaps a great deal across different regions of the world, so choosing to present the "distinguishing features" of a civilization is

already a process of emaciation which leaves out a huge part that is not so distinctive. What made the task even more difficult for the organizers was the fact that they had to showcase the 5,000 year Chinese civilization in the course of an hour. Zhang Yimou, the artistic director of the opening ceremony, discussed the challenge in a face-to-face interview with Wu Xiaoli on Phoenix TV and proposed the following two considerations as his team's main criteria for selecting the so-called "Chinese elements" to be displayed on the opening day. First, the chosen symbols of Chinese culture had to be familiar to the international audience or at least very simple to understand. Second, those easily recognizable symbols of China had to be an integral part of the entire show which was a complex interplay between different themes. (Zhou, 2008, p. 47)

As a result of the first criterion, the "Chinese elements" selected for this grand occasion tended to be those that frequently appear in the mass media of foreign countries such as Confucianism, Chinese writing, Peking opera, the great wall, calligraphy, writing brush, scroll, bamboo slip, porcelain, tea, zither, Tai-ji, gong and drum. There are of course many other things or objects that foreigners can readily associate with Chinese culture but were not included in the presentation at the opening ceremony: the Yellow River, the Yangtze River, the Forbidden City, the Book of Changes, Chinese medicine, Chinese chess, abacus, chopsticks, panda, dragon, and what not. Even if the director had had the time and space to incorporate them all into the opening ceremony, these "familiar" China-related things and objects still could not be said to represent the "essence" of Chinese culture. One could very well argue, for example, that the plow is a more appropriate symbol of China not only because it was first invented in that country but also because it embodies the basic mode of living that its huge agrarian population had had for thousands of years.

We should also keep in mind that the selection of cultural symbols for use is never a value free enterprise. In addition to the mostly ideologically-neutral material objects listed above, there are many value-laden ideas and notions that are habitually associated with China such as polygamy, women's bound feet, female infanticide, opium-smoking and drug dealing – negative images that have been sustained and disseminated through various literary works and movies in circulation outside the People's Republic of China. One is reminded here of Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth* (1931), Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* (1987) and, ironically, Zhang Yimou's *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991). The state-sponsored opening ceremony of the 29<sup>th</sup> Olympic Games was certainly no place to cater to the Orientalist discourse which might otherwise bring individual artists a small share of the Western market of cultural products; the clear mission and objective of the event was to make known to the world that China is a peace-loving nation that has contributed to the world civilization in more than one ways.

#### 2.4.2 Textual Constraints

Nevertheless, these Chinese contributions to the world must be structurally integrated into the artistic presentation of the opening ceremony as a whole and in this respect the director and his crew seemed to have done a superb job which won great acclaims world wide. Instead of bluntly enumerating the four great inventions that ancient China made in the course of its evolution, the director unnoticeably inserted them into the main narrative of the night which was about Olympic Games and Olympic spirit. At the very beginning of the opening ceremony, there was a trail of 29 fireworks in the shape of footprints that set off from the center of Beijing city and moved toward the national stadium at the rate of one footprint every second, each representing one of the 29 Olympiads of the modern era.



For most Chinese, however, the fireworks were enough of a prompt to make them feel proud of one the greatest Chinese inventions which they learn about early in primary school. Then there was what many considered the most impressive narrative medium of the entire show – a giant Chinese scroll on which the history of Chinese

civilization was literally unfolded on the stadium floor in front of the audience:



As a self-explanation, a short film was projected onto the LCD screen illustrating the process of scroll-making that starts with the preparation of the four treasures of the study (writing brush, inkstick, inkslab and paper), painting and writing itself, and mounting and fixing the finished product onto a roller. In this way another great Chinese invention, the manufacturing of paper, was surreptitiously inserted into the flow of the main narrative. On the same giant scroll a little later, the audience was treated to a fluid array of 897 movable type blocks that formed in succession three variations (bronze inscription, seal script and regular script) of “和”:



When translated into English, this Chinese character means “harmony” which constituted one of the sub-themes of the opening ceremony: harmony between man and nature, harmony between nations, and harmony between ethnic groups, but the way it was presented also served as a clear reminder of the great Chinese invention: movable-type printing. Next, there appeared a female dancer swinging green ribbons around her body like some of the figures found in the grottos of Dunhuang on the Silk Road that linked China with Europe through land. Also came into view was a procession of men in blue dress, the oars in their hands forming pictures of junks which symbolized the voyages of a Ming court official Zheng He, who reached Africa by sea. Although this entire episode was meant to signify Chinese willingness to open up to the outside world as the country did in its heydays in the past, one of the details presented was cleverly appropriated to also celebrate the fourth great invention that ancient China made for the benefit of the world.



Unlike the three previous occasions, the intention of the director was quite clear this time when a male dancer in an official robe was shown moving around in the center of the scroll (which contained images of sailing junks) while holding a compass in its earliest form. But even an explicit gesture like this may still have gone unnoticed by most of the audience who were overwhelmed by everything else that was going on that particular night. The opening ceremony was after all what today's media experts would call a "spectacle". This kind of live events are not designed for intellectual lectures or storytelling but for a primeval emotional experience on the part of the audience and the latter can be achieved only through killer performances and jaw-dropping beauties. It is the thrill of the grand show, not those narrative details, that touches and moves people. Here lies another cause of cultural emaciation.

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