

Behind the Hyperreality Experience: The 2008 Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony

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Abstract

Some observers, such as Brooks (2008, August 12) in *Harmony and the Dream*, have considered collectivism as the key contribution to the aesthetics of the Opening Ceremony of the Beijing Olympics. Against such views, this paper takes the position that simulacra (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 125) of classical Chinese philosophy are presented as the core underpinning aesthetics of the Opening in a contemporary context, through the Western experience of hyperreality by means of digital technology, and supported by the collective aesthetics. The paper is based on research into the 'behind-the-scenes' documentary produced and broadcast by China Central Television (CCTV), and discourse about the Opening in the context of broader Internet discussions. Current discourses on collectivism in the aesthetics of the Opening have been associated with social and political concerns, rather than the art and design aesthetic paradigm that influences current consumer culture. However, it is not the intention of this paper to discuss the political references involved. The paper investigates that the contemporary reshaped classical Chinese philosophical aesthetics is the stimulus of the seemingly collective aesthetics at work. Such aesthetics is designed and presented to fulfill the expectation of the Western (or global) context; as such it is a copy of a copy of the Western constructed Chinese aesthetics that is at work. Though the behind-the-scenes documentary of CCTV is generally considered a marketing tool for the event, it provides useful data for investigation of the creative constituent of the hyperreal experience of the audience.

Introduction

While the 2008 Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony (Gunts & Ebersol, 2008, August 8) is an orthodox example of a Chinese political and economic parade, it was approached through the geographical relocation of Western audiences, and performance through broadcast media, and the reshaping of Chinese ancient history and traditional philosophy presented as simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1994) of Chinese aesthetics through the contemporary digital hyperreal¹ environment. Irrespective of the West acknowledging the already-changed perception of China's extracting Western technological resources, the aesthetic manifestation of the Opening² revealed to the world that China is innovative in its own way.

Yet the framing of the collective aesthetics in the Opening represented by Brooks (2008, August 12) is a Western view of the dichotomy between individuality and collectivity (collectivism), capitalism and communism, and self and otherness. Today, China maintains the operation of a capitalist system beneath its communist sovereignty. To many Western observers, this structure continues to purport

¹ In his discussion on Simulacra and Simulation, Baudrillard (Glaser, translated, 1994, p. 125) gave a basic concept of hyperreal as "neither possible nor impossible, neither real nor unreal".

² Opening is used in this paper as the abbreviation of Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony 2008

collectivity. Yet in my view, it is the constant repositioning between the two systems that takes effect and functions; there is no absolute individuality and collectivity, or self and otherness; there is instead a constantly re-translating, reshaping, and re-formulating of the dichotomised. In another words, constantly lingering in between the dichotomised for achieving temporal resolutions for the here and now would be a more pertinent proposition to describe the current Chinese approach.

This paper is in large part of the discourse that responses to the Opening, with consideration towards how the ceremony might be understood within a larger framework of hyperreal public spectacles. My proposition is that collectivism has been the underpinning design strategy of Olympic opening ceremonies since the 1930s. This paper, which is situated in the art and design paradigm, suggests that immense presentation of simulacra of classical Chinese aesthetics through the medium of digital technology to create an environment of hyperreality is the key stimulus to the success of the Opening. Researching into and reviewing the series of behind-the-scenes documentaries (Zhu, 2008) produced and broadcast by China Central Television (CCTV) and the discourses about the Opening in a broader context of Internet discussion will form the research basis of the paper.

Overview of CCTV's Behind-the-Scenes Documentaries

CCTV produced a series of behind-the-scenes documentaries (Zhu, 2008) of the Opening that were screened during and after the Olympic Games. This is one of the contemporary marketing and branding approaches of an event. The content includes extensive interviews with the creative team behind the Opening, which was led by Zhang Yimou. The themes of the Opening as described by Zhang³ were: romantic and dreamlike; digital technology presented as poetry and art (painting); Eastern sense and emotion presented through high-end technology (through integration of Eastern sense and emotion with high-end technology). The project had undergone three years of creative development including over two thousand meetings. The main creative strategy was arrived at through a method known as *survival by compromise*, a rigorous process of evaluating and eliminating ideas until consensus is achieved. The team took its inspiration from everyday life; a direct translation from the Chinese is “the daily mundane”⁴. In the interview, Zhang explains that the overarching schematic structure consisted of two major parts: the historical (unfolding of the scroll) and the contemporary (the scroll continuing to unfold, extending to become rivers) China. The main approaches were: refusing to use the semiotic signs that are familiar to the West; integrating the most ancient aesthetics with the newest technology; and being highly dependent on technology that is of high risk – the LED screen consisted of 20 million light-emitting diodes, added to which was the complexity of controlling the software and hardware (Zhu, 2008).

This paper is divided into three main parts. Firstly, I discuss the different views on collectivity and individuality between the Chinese and the West generated about the Opening. Secondly, I develop my view that creating hyperreality was the key success of the Opening in engaging the audience, and thirdly, I suggest that simulacra of

³ I have interpreted and translated his ideas from Chinese.

⁴ As examples: The gradual lifting of the Olympic logo (a mandatory scenario) was inspired by the peeling-off of a protective membrane; and the lighting of the Olympic frame was inspired by the peeling of an apple.

contemporarily reshaped Chinese philosophy is the underpinning aesthetics employed to manifest the *One World, One Dream* theme of the Opening.

Collectivism or Individualism

Brooks (2008, August 12), commenting on the Opening, suggests that it showed that “People in collective societies tend to value harmony and duty. They tend to underestimate their own skills and are more self-effacing when describing their contributions to group efforts” (para. 6). He describes the success of achieving harmony as a collective effort manifested through the aesthetics of mass conformity, suggesting that through the Opening, “a new sort of global conversation develops” (ibid., para. 9) between collectivist and individualistic societies. He takes a social and political view, demarcating collectivism and individualism.

Among the Internet bloggers who picked up on this, kevinonovan (2008, August 13) argues against Brooks’ idea that the current economic success of China is the consequence of the Chinese embracing capitalism while maintaining a collectivist spirit; in other words, *collectivist capitalism*. He suggests that it is driven by self-interest and is individualistic.

In another response to Brooks’s article, Appleyard (2008, August 12) asserts that “Seeing China as solely collectivist and America as nothing but individualist is an illusion... differences between nations can seldom be reduced to a simple duality”.⁵

Morris and Peng’s (as cited in Bianxiangbianqiao, 2008, August 14, para. 6) view acknowledges the different Eastern worldview of an individual’s connection to the collective society: “the Western view on the social world [is] analytical, with each element (individual) viewed as discrete and operating separately, while the East Asian cultures view the social world holistically, with the discrete factors mutually constraining and influencing each others’ movements”(ibid.).

It is no surprise either that the lip-syncing of the children Lin and Yang in the Opening stirred up criticism from the West on the issue of autonomy and independent personality, or that the defence of the Opening’s music director Chen Qigang reported in the China Daily Post (as cited in Fool’s Mountain, 2008, para. 11)⁶ has been viewed as favouring collective thought (that of society) over individuality (that of Lin and Yang).

However, investigating Morris and Peng’s (as cited in Bianxiangbianqiao, 2008, August 14, para. 6) view that “The East Asian cultures tend to view the individual as passively responding to environmental constraints, pressures and inducements,

⁵ Appleyard (2008, August 12): “There’s a strange and ambivalent column in the New York Times by David Brooks about collectivism versus individualism, ... To a large extent, these are matters of rhetoric. ... Brooks rightly says that the rise of China is cultural. But he means it is not just economic. I think it is only cultural and culture can only be felt”.

⁶ In the interview, Chen Qigang said: “I think the viewers should be able to understand that, in the national interest, for the perception of the country, ... We made a decision, which I think was fair to both Lin and Yang. We felt the coupling of a perfect voice with the best appearance produced the most optimal result”.

directed by exigencies and obligations” would justify the lip-syncing decision as the pursuit of collective perfection.

MutantJedi (2008, August 14) also argues that American individualism is something of a myth (para. 2), as is Chinese collectivism, and that collectivism doesn't seem to fit well with the idea of the Harmonious Society⁷. His view is that

While collectivism may have been dominant until Mao's death, it is not a fundamental characteristic of Chinese culture. The group is important but what is more important is the individual's relationship within the various layers/members of the group. 孙悟空⁸ [Sun Wukong] is a fascinating Chinese character that cannot be stuffed into a box of Collectivism. Yet, he is a character in various contexts with various relationships with the society around him (ibid., para.10).

He concludes that a group of people (Chinese) can be highly collectivistic but possess different behaviour patterns at the same time, and that on the other hand a group (American) can be highly individualistic but look to each other to determine what the appropriate action is.

Zhang Quanyi (2008, August 28) acknowledges Geert Hofstede's position on individualistic and collectivist cultures; that is, a collectivist culture stresses the collective interest and downplays personal preferences and interests; he goes on to point out that the individual is intimately linked with social norms valued by the majority.

Jia and Jia (2008) see the Opening from a Western-centred perspective, which is that on the one hand, the values of individualism were brought into play, while on the other hand, making a nationwide effort was a collective success. This offers a win-win development of the two opposing (individualistic and collectivistic) ideologies or identities. They disregard the in-flux state of contemporary Chinese ideology.

Only referencing the 'collectively constructed' visual aesthetics, Brooke's hypothetical view is questionable if not spurious. It is also tenable to say that the dichotomy of individualism and collectivism is invoked by some authors like Brooke, in both China and 'the West', to oppose these societies to each other. Yet Brooke's deposition stirred up responsive discourses. Viewing the Opening from such dichotomy is a negotiation with China's capitalist approach beneath its communist system, while irrelevant in context⁹, it does reflect in part the present perception that

⁷ MutantJedi (ibid.): “As much as Americans enjoy the story of the Individual, it is a society that doesn't really like things to be outside of expectations ...[and by the same token] The Chinese are not really the drones that the government nor [sic] the West seem to want to believe in. ... if you consider that Harmonious Society has more to do with the individual's context in society, how he and the group relate, then walking through busy, noisy, chaotic streets suddenly seem more in tune with harmony”.

⁸ Sun Wukong [孙悟空], known in the West as the Monkey King, is the main character in the classical Chinese epic novel *Journey to the West* by Wu Cheng En [吴承恩] around 1590.

⁹ China was working in partnership with the Olympics Organisation on the Opening. While China might have taken a primary role on the design, there are disciplinary guidelines to follow. And

is informed through the visual ‘collective’ aesthetics of the Opening. To an extent, this is a false dichotomy that does represent certain judgements that some people cling to. Admittedly, this false dichotomy is influential if not powerful.

While the dialectic discussion of the Opening revolved around a collective aesthetics, I would suggest that contemporary discourses of collectivism and individualism are constantly undergoing negotiation in different cultural contexts in the here and now. This fluid and dynamic nature has unsettled current cultural beliefs in different cultural contexts. The opening-up of Chinese territory through contemporary technology creates a virtual environment. Such environment is a carrier to present Chinese historical contents and the re-formulated classical aesthetics that are seemingly unfamiliar to audiences. As a consequence, the Opening creates tension to provide a novel experience in which the audiences’ state of mind is temporarily relocated to immerse in a hyperreal environment.

The Aesthetics and Identity of Hyperreality

Hyperreality in Play

In this section, I establish a position that it is the hyperreal identity of *One World, One Dream* created by technology through simulacra (Baudrillard, 1994) of Chinese aesthetics that took a central role in the success of the Opening. Through giving practical examples from the Opening, I argue that creating hyperreality through digital technology was the main creative goal that made Chinese culture and aesthetics more accessible to the world. In turn, it temporarily opened up the Chinese territory to the world.

The concept of hyperreality has been extensively discussed by contemporary scholars. In this paper, I mainly refer to the ideas by Robert Goldman, Stephen Papson, Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, and John Tiffin and Nobuyoshi Terashima, the latter being extensions of Jean Baudrillard’s, that primarily refers to the kind of reality that emerges from producing simulacra of simulacra. This was in play in the Opening; copies of copies of Chinese culture with no real original were displayed enormously, engaging the audiences in a virtual journey to encounter Chinese history.

I take Tiffin and Terashima’s (2001) position that “Hyperreality creates virtual reality to be an experience in the physical reality, so that virtual reality and physical reality interact with one another. Virtual reality provides virtual worlds that seem more ‘convincing’ to those who experience it. However, hyperreality, provides ‘HyperWorlds’ that blurs the line between what is ‘real’ and what is ‘virtual’ and make it appear ‘natural’” (p. 31). To consolidate this position, in my view hyperreality has the quality of portraying a belief that does not exist in reality, and an effect on us of believing something that we know does not exist.

Goldman and Papson (1994) suggest that “Hyperreal encoding points to efforts to connote a sense of unmediated reality, but always via a coding system that is mediated” (p. 31) and “littered with ambiguous dangling signifiers, so viewers must

Olympics Organisation operates under a capitalist system, as such that the collaborative output of the Opening was not merely managed under the communist system.

supply a narrative based on their knowledge of the connotative and denotative associations of a signifier” (p. 34). To be activated, hyperreality also “rel[ies] on the ‘realism’ of hypersignifiers seek[ing] to convey an existential quality by emphasizing its gestural significance rather than its form ... hypersignifier-based ads offer instead to give you back a sign of yourself as you are”; and most importantly, “Hypersignifiers may be organized to deny the fiction of reproducibility, but they actually reproduce that condition” (p. 36). Goldman and Papson (ibid.) also claim (using TV codes and TV texts as media in their discussion) that “media intertextuality” is a constant process of re-mythologising, and is pervasive. Intertextuality relies on the self-referentiality of the viewers to abstract and generalise from specific texts and other media, and is extended through reflexivity (pp. 36-39).

Sturken and Cartwright (2001) suggest that in contemporary consumer culture, self-identity represents the identity of an individual and a group (p. 193); extending to “Stuart Ewen’s ‘commodity self’” (p.196) that is constructed through connecting to commodity. In turn, such behaviour, or *commodity fetishism* (p. 200) adds new meanings to mystify the object (commodity). Commodity fetishism operates through *reification*, a process by which abstract ideas are assumed to be real and concrete (p. 201).

Another key essence of consumer culture was in play in the Opening. This is the denial of difference, which encourages conformist behaviour through the act of consumption (ibid., p. 221). Entwining memories with reality, the constant re-occurrence of a mass collective display of activities manifested in ebullient kinetic forms created vast scenes of hyperreality. In this sense, the mediated codes (Goldman and Papson, 1994) of collective aesthetics had become a key essence of contemporary consumer culture to connote a sense of unmediated reality (ibid.). While watching the Opening, individual self consumed copies and copies (Baudrillard, 1994) of commodity and becoming a commodity self (Ewen, 2001). The line of virtual and real was blurred to becoming natural (Tiffin and Terashima, 2001), thus constituted a hyperworld. In a way, collective aesthetics and identity are nourishing substances to create a hypereal environment.

Hyperreal Aesthetics: Human Interaction with Technology

It is significant that the Opening placed a high demand on human interaction with technology. Relying heavily on technology with the 147m by 22m LED screen, one of the largest in the world, was of high risk; and while Zhang Yimou claimed that such an approach - of unpredictability - had never played such a central role in a grand opening, he also expressed his uneasiness at such an approach (Zhu, 2008). Man in control of technology, or the other way round? Zhang’s view on unpredictability would be on the insecurity to control the performing outcomes that are due to: the design complexity of technological set up; the real time collaboration between the performers and technologies (which are controlled by humans); and the subsequent manifestation of virtual illusion. Simply put, differing from filming a movie that allows post-editing, there is no tolerance on the malfunction for the real life performance. Irrespective of the claimed unpredictability by Zhang, human interaction with technology creates a spatial depth of ‘in-between’ classical cultural beliefs and the contemporary interpretation of it, man-made (constructed) and natural phenomena, traditional aesthetics and the technological representation of it, and two-dimensional and three-dimensional interplay of media. Such spatial depth is

vulnerable and contrives evoking feeling of human's ability to control technological advancement, thus empowering the hyperreality of *One World, One Dream*.

Criticism

Criticism among the Internet discussion reactions to the Opening came from various sources, including comments on the Strong Nation forum, reported in China Times via DWnews (as cited in EastSouthWestNorth, n.d.)¹⁰ to the effect that it was boring, disappointing, empty and vacuous; from Song Shinan, posted on bullog.cn (as cited in EastSouthWestNorth, n.d.) about the empty and spiritless 'bigness' aesthetics;¹¹ and from Liu Hongbo (as cited in China Digital Times, 2008, para.1) about the lack of personality at the expense of grand beauty, and the resulting spread of this undesirable aesthetics nationally. Zhu Dake's (as cited in China Digital Times, 2008, August para. 10-11) point was that Zhang's "aesthetic pursuit" of mass games is a form of fascist aesthetics. Cui Weiping (as cited in China Digital Times, 2008, para.12-14), professor at Beijing Academy of Film, has previously highlighted aspects of fascist aesthetics with reference to Susan Sontag's analysis of the Nazi filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl's cinematic portrayal of mountains; mountains that "lured an individual human being to reach some place beyond his life, either to devote himself to an organization of his compatriots or to death", going on to say: "Sontag's analysis could also be applied to [Zhang's] film *Hero*, in which mountains and rivers were depicted in similar ways as in Riefenstahl's films" (ibid.).

However, it would be arbitrary to suggest without in-depth investigation that the Opening was another representation of Zhang's signature collective aesthetics, such as his recently produced commercial film, *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006) as an example. Zhang's commercial films have always been contrived; manifested through precise control without any obvious fault or flaw. The collective visual elements of mass numbers of humans or objects that do not involve a high risk of losing control have always been an imperative and substantial part of a grand performance. Zhang is an expert player in this context; having learnt self-control from his commercial film directing which is indebted to the Western ideology, he manages any magnificent scene of collectivism with ease. However, do these collective visual scenes play a central role throughout the whole performance? Or are collective scenes essential in a grand performance?

If mass performance (or totalitarian display) has traditionally been the visual essence of Olympic Opening Ceremonies since the 1930s, the question is, what would be the interpretative difference between those Openings directed and performed in collective and those in individualistic systems?

¹⁰ Following the visit by Chairman Hu Jintao, the Strong Nation forum under People's Net has become ... the "official forum." Most people who visit that forum tend to be supportive of the government. But even at the Strong Nation forum, the number of detractors [of the Opening] exceeded the number of supporters by a lot" (para. 2)

¹¹ Song's witty diatribe includes the following: "We all know that Zhang Yimou likes 'bigness.' In *Hero*, we saw that he liked the 'big unity'. In *Curse of the Golden Flower*, we saw that he liked 'girls with big tits.' In the Olympics opening ceremony, we saw that he liked 'big scenes'. Regrettably, these big scenes were empty and spiritless. This is like a mouth with a tongue cut off -- it does not matter how wide the mouth is opened because you can only hear some unclear moaning sounds"

One would usually associate collective aesthetics (or totalitarian display) with fascist aesthetics. This is significant in the case of Riefenstahl's Olympics films that were commissioned by the Nazi government instead of the Olympic committee (Sontag, 1975, p. 2). However, it is fair to say that while totalitarian display (cross reference Carr's discussion, p. 9) is one of the visual symbols of fascist aesthetics, it is also commonly applied to the past Olympic Openings (and other types of performance) to construct grand and sublime scenes instead. Taking Zhang's totalitarian displays (cross reference, p. 7) in his commercial films as an example, they are much influenced by the Hollywood movies instead.

I would also like to point out a key differing approach between totalitarian display of collective aesthetics with that of fascist. Conformity in the role between every performance members takes a more central role in fascist aesthetics, while in collective aesthetics, each member might take a different role to coordinate with the others to achieve a conformed unity. For example, in the show of Movable-Type Print of the Opening, each human member took a different role to present different actions and together they formed a collective unity. The collective scene of Taiji with mass performers of conformity in their movements works towards the fascist aesthetics. In other words, the ultimate goal of fascist aesthetics tends towards portraying an all-in-one unity amongst members of the community, while in collective aesthetics, members may have different role to serve in order to portray a united goal.

Irrespective of whether fascist aesthetics had strong influence towards the Opening, collective mass display of humans interacting with technology was one of the integral visual strategies to create virtual effects. However, I would argue that the ultimate goal of mass display is to achieve scenes of sublimity, which is common in any type of performance. In this sense, the collective mass displays were massive copies of hypersignifiers to heighten the hyperreal effect.

The Unpredicted and Uncontrolled

The visual manifestation of the Beijing Opening in real time was risky and highly unpredictable: the LED screen as the main 'performer'; the complexity of transforming creativity to performance; the lighting of the Olympic flame; the anti-gravity scenes; the firework and the lighting effects and so on. These required sophisticated collaborations between all participating members. The level of unpredictability and uncontrolledness were beyond expectation. The unexpected is what pushed the hyperreality effect to the extreme.

Digital LED Screen as a Performer

The digital LED screen, formed by a mass number of diodes, played a central role in displaying the grand scenes. Each diode as a digital cell of the LED screen (as a digital canvas) forms a collective unity, and each of them took a unique role in every moment of the performance. In parallel, mass human performers played a similar role, interacting with the digital cells, forming an extended canvas. The collaboration of diode and human was integral to support the creation of the magnificent scenes: for example, the white gull performers interacting with the digital scene and becoming digital cells; the unfolding of the scroll, achieved through digital technology and human interactions with it; the making of paper, the dancing painters with moving clouds on the paper (digital), the classic piano solo, the formation of the painted

mountain and the raising/rise of the ink painting; the digital book interacting with the disciples and dissolving into the invention of printing.

The incessant formation of these grand scenes, common in military performance, constituted Brooks' (and others') idea of a collective aesthetics. However, when the movement and collaboration of the human mass performers is put under close scrutiny, it is evident they did not achieve military precision; often they were imperfect and incomplete¹². This signified their supporting role in the Opening. Adam Carr (2008, August 11)¹³ notes that traditionally the aesthetics of the Olympic Opening follows the massed athletic performers invented by the USSR, based on the principle of submergence of the individual in the mass, being "the basic principle of totalitarian display" (Msg 12). In this sense, Zhang took the principle of Olympic aesthetics further; through technology to a hyperreality aesthetics.

The Hyperreal Identity

It is my view that shifting the audience's identity unintentionally between that of audience and performer is one of the key essences to the success of the Opening. This crossing over of identity was adeptly manoeuvred during the performance. This was a show that constantly invited and encouraged the audience to participate; not simply watching, but engaging with the same experience of the performers as insiders: for example, the solo young woman Taiji player crossing over the collective mass of players who stimulated the audience to participate in a virtual sense into a state of self-performing; the 2008 portraits from all nations; Li Ning lighting the flame, and so on. These scenes were interweaved with scenes that distanced the audience, and control was regained through amusing the audience. For example, the audience only watched as outsiders, and enjoyed, during Sarah Brightman and Liu Huan singing the official Olympic song *Me and You*, the Beijing Opera, and the piano solo. Through these moments of cross-over identity, the audience was guided to establish the gradual sedimentation (Li, 2005, p. 159) of poetic experience, and a hyperreal identity emerged, thus engaging everyone in a self-negotiating and self-adjusting state of a collective *One World, One Dream* harmony. At these moments, each individual audience member became part of the collective wholeness of the Opening, no longer wanting to dwell on the abiding differences; this way harmony was achieved.

Brightman & Liu singing the Olympic song *Me and You* is a model example of identity drifting. While their singing had distanced the audience to enjoy the show in the traditional (audience vs performer) way, the collective scenes activated the hyperreal Me (China) with the liminal You (the audience), unfolding the private (China) and transforming it to become public (one world). The still-existing hierarchy

¹² Ben (2008) spotted and posted images of seven mistakes of the Opening as follows: #1 Movable-Type Print – Moment of Truth, #2 The Girl On The Piano, #3 I See Dead Pixels, #4 Lighting of the Torch, #5 The Skewed Boat, #6 The Light Runners & #7 Flag Throwing.

¹³ Carr (ibid.): "It's worth noting that the basic structure of Olympic Games opening ceremonies - the torch relay, lighting the flame, etc etc, were invented by Goebbels for the 1936 Games, and have merely been elaborated on by subsequent games organisers. The tone of ponderous earnestness that characterises all these ceremonies is pure Goebbels (The only exception, if I may say so as an Australian, was the Sydney Games opening in 2000, which injected a bit of humour with lawnmowers etc.). But Goebbels himself was working from a template developed in the USSR under Stalin. Much of what we consider the "fascist aesthetic" is actually the "stalinist aesthetic" with the red flags removed".

of public & private seemed to be disappearing as China welcomed the world to Beijing, resonating with the Confucian “Friend come from afar, we are very happy”, and transforming the territory of the Chinese nation to become one world. Employing the British singer Brightman¹⁴ to sing (in the role of a host) with the Chinese Liu was a strategic decision made to help unfold the private China to become part of the public World.

Summary

Hyperreality aesthetics and identity played central roles in the Opening. They were achieved through the interaction of human beings and technology. Mass aesthetics is a traditional principle of Olympic Openings, and while it was significant, it only played a supporting role in the Beijing Opening. It was often approached and manifested through the collaboration of individual performers playing different roles in the performance. The level of unpredictable risk in the cause of grandeur and dynamism was unprecedented, therefore stimulating reflexive response of the audience(s) to resonate with the hyperreal encodings of the Opening. These hyperreal codings, constructed mainly through the unfolding of the Chinese philosophical aesthetics, will be discussed in the following section. It was the main constituent of Zhang’s success in inviting the audience along a fantasy journey to comprehending Chinese history.

Simulacra of Chinese Philosophy in Display

In this chapter, my discussions and citations on classical Chinese philosophy are based on the discourses and retranslation by contemporary scholars and intellectuals; many of them are indebted to their reading and rendering through Western philosophical thoughts and categories. In this regard, my narration of these sources does not constitute an original examination of classical Chinese thoughts. It is indeed the simulacrum (or a copy) instead. Similarly, the Opening that offered a vision of Chinese thought and aesthetics is a copy of its own copy. This is in parallel with Zhang’s ideas on the Opening; they were shaped by his own thoughts of rendering in the renowned Chinese aesthetics of his commercial films. His interpretation and re-narrating of Chinese thinking in commercial films for a global context are partly shaped by and created for the global audience. In another words, the displayed Chinese aesthetics and thinking in the Opening were shaped by and created for the global audience. They are copies for fulfilling the expectation of the global audience (the already shaped copies). In addition, Zhang is much influenced by his cultural upbringing of Mao’s revolutionary act towards classical Chinese culture. His view is thus a copy of it, made after it had been destroyed, and learnt by him in his adulthood. Therefore, my discussions in this chapter are simulacra of contemporary thoughts on Chinese philosophy.

Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism have always been mainstream in Chinese philosophy and aesthetics, with different approaches in didacticism. Confucians yield to the *wen* [文] and *li* [礼] to approach an orderly society; whilst Buddhists approach it through the concept of impermanence of life and Daoists advocate the relationship of man and nature. The ultimate goal is to attain a spiritual state of harmony between individuals, cultures and other myriad elements. Daoism’s idea of the historical unity of Man and Heaven (Nature) (*tian ren he yi*) [天人合一] has taken the central role in

¹⁴ It was not until the last few weeks that the decision was made to invite Sarah Brightman and Liu Huan to replace the Chinese singing duo, who had been practicing for months.

art and aesthetics. Li's idea of the *humanisation of nature* and *naturalisation of humans* (2005, p. 163) provides a contemporary view for the Chinese classical philosophy of the unification of Man and Heaven to achieving harmony. "Art is nothing but the psychological homologue to our sensuous existence; it lies in our daily experience, our psychological-emotional construction" (ibid. p. 167).

Contemporary philosophers have, according to Fang (2003) suggested that in the 21st century, the global trend of philosophical ideas is "harmony but no assimilation" (pp. 1-2).¹⁵ Xu (2001) comments that Sikong's idea of *image beyond image* [像外像], *scene beyond scene* [景外景] is a classical Chinese idea of achieving harmony between subjectivity (concept) and objectivity (scene) (p. 250). This idea of the harmony between the self (artist) and his/her experience (scene) should extend to include the harmony between subjectivity (concept) of individual-selves — artist and audience and their objectivity (experience).

Displaying on screen the journey of connecting with nature (synonymous in this context with heaven) to the audience was the core constituent to project the contemporary order of classical philosophy, constructed as possessing a harmony lacking in the present. Thus providing a hyperreal experience and as such, while harmony was achieved, it was also dreamlike, according to Zhang (Zhu, 2008).

From a philosophical perspective, the whole performance is a ritual of Man connecting with Heaven to achieve harmony. The seemingly contradictory aesthetics of collective individuality constantly projects copies of copies of Chinese aesthetics for the audiences to ponder over and to locate their own copies of harmony-in-between. Harmony may not only be achieved, but like limpidity of water, is always in a state of flux: harmony with *qi* [气] (vitality)¹⁶. Thus audiences are engaged by their immersion in and connection to copies of copies of Chinese history, through human beings interacting with technology.

In this sense, the sublime collective scenes were major constituents of *qi* that opened the territory of the performance and invited the audience to participate - to become performers temporarily, and to connect the *qi* of individual audience with that of the performance [cross-referencing Taiji performance]. The collective scenes as physical *qi* stimulated the internal *qi* of the audience-self. From the hyperreal perspective, the *qi* of the audience was connected with the *qi* of technology and constituted a virtual experience to the audience to interact.

The Unfolding

The virtual migration of 29 firework 'footsteps' from the Great Hall of People [人民大会堂] (a landmark of collective individuality) to the National Stadium (Bird's Nest) to signify the Olympic history of 29th anniversary resonated with the opening-up of China's territory to the rest of the world, as well as fusing the Me-and-You

¹⁵ Fang (2003, pp. 1-2): "[there will] not be the 'conflict of civilization' ... [that] some Western scholars have predicted, but rather a co-existence of various civilizations. ... In the new century, Chinese philosophy should obtain much more esteem and therefore the equal communication, dialogues, and fusion between Chinese and Western Philosophical traditions may be expected to enter into a new great phase."

¹⁶ A collection of collated opinions by West (2007, p. 207) suggests that *qi* has the quality of 'life in motion', 'movement through spirit consonance', 'spirit resonance' and 'harmony of the spirit'.

identity. Starting from this moment, the National Stadium had replaced the Temple of Heaven [天坛] as a philosophical site to connect to Nature.

The lighting of the Olympic flame¹⁷ represented at its culmination Man's role of connecting Earth with Heaven. This was manifested within the Western idea of Man conquering Nature, expressed by the illusory running-in-the-air of Li Ning¹⁸ against gravity, and the anti-gravity of collective performers throughout the Opening. Li Ning who played the role of hero (or emperor) was an individual representing the collective wholeness of humanity.

In parallel, the Confucian concept of harmony in society (collective harmony between individuals and society) also operated and was exhibited intrinsically through the *One World, One Dream* idea of brotherhood¹⁹: "Friends coming from afar, we are very happy". Again, the contemporary re-translation and re-representation of Confucian harmony was reshaped by current scholars for contemporary consumers; and expanded and re-translated by the organiser (Chinese communist party) and branded for the consumers (audiences). Thus these simulacra of Confucian harmony were constructed by and for the consumers of the global context. Together they constitute contemporary iconographic image(s) (Beer, 1999, p. 11) of Confucian harmony. Other examples include the 56 children from different tribes who represented the unity of the country and the ethos of the Olympic Games; and the collective mass of Taiji players as digital pixels to represent the *qi* (of technology and humanity) being in harmony.

Audience collective engagement on watching the Opening was phenomenal. For a moment, You and Me were one family, crossing territories and cultures. Confucius' concept "we all are brothers" was imbued in the smiles of the children from all Chinese ethnicities, connecting everyone to Heaven.

For the first time, others (You) were invited to enter Chinese history as a way to understand China; yet they did not realise. During these moments, the audience (the others) were immersed in and shared the enjoyment of the enchanting performance. They became insiders because they believed they now had a better understanding of China (at least in these moments): a fantasy created by the hyperreal environment.

Fine-grained observation also reveals a crossing-over scenario that represents the acts of humbling and being modest, celebrating, worshipping and flaunting. The rhythm was constructed to underscore the parade of humanity's respect for nature through the scenario of history. This was seen mostly from a higher angle; the progress of Man

¹⁷ It is worth noting that the lighting of the Olympic flame was inspired by the everyday act of peeling an apple.

¹⁸ Also note Rana (2008, August 9, para. 16): "Li glided through the stadium in true gymnastic style (albeit with the help of tight rope [sic]), to light the sacred flame in the cauldron - with a touch of creativity. He did not climb atop the stadium to do so. Instead, he lit a huge tube through which the flame, in a flashy and scorching run, travelled to the giant torch, setting alight the Olympic flame of peace".

¹⁹ Also note Rana (2008, August 9, para.8): "Brotherhood and peace were behind the theme song, too. Liu Huan and Sarah Brightman infused life into the lyrics: for dreams we travel thousands of miles, we meet in Beijing, come together, the joy we share, you and me"

connecting to Heaven, such as those scenes portraying the rising to the sky, were seen from a lower angle. Performers' postures were also significant in the display of mankind's praise of Heaven, such as the singing children of diverse ethnicities, Brightman's & Liu's song, and so on. Feitian [飞天]²⁰ (Flying Apsaras) believed to be the first flying god in Chinese painting history, was used to portray the flying-up to the sky (Heaven) alongside the gradual lifting up of the Olympic logo, again connecting Man with Heaven. These together successfully portray the connection of Man with Heaven, ultimately culminating in the flaunting of a celebrated nation of richness, power and happiness.

These scenarios played a primary role towards constructing hypersignifiers of a collective spiritual respect for nature. Wang Chaoge, a core member of the creative team behind the Opening, interviewed in the behind-the-scenes documentary (Zhu, 2008), said: "Transforming uniqueness to become form and content is not impossible, however, narrating uniqueness is most challenging... This is the Chinese narrating approach in aesthetics"²¹. However, such Chinese narrating approach was made possible through technological advancement, and I would suggest that uniqueness is in the ingredients: copies of copies of Chinese philosophical aesthetics.

Summary

In the context of consumer identity, *You and Me* is an appellation that while mostly contradictory, is effective (Williamson, as cited in Sturken & Cartright, 2001, p.203). Captivating scenes of technological hyperreality constitute a sign of consuming totality (Baudrillard, as cited in Sednaoui, 2009, p.187). However, it is the encountering of simulacra of the Chinese philosophy of Man connecting with Heaven (Nature) that has an effect. The hypersignifier (Goldman and Papson, 1994) is also at work to provide signs that the audiences desired. In addition, these signs deny fiction of reproducibility, but they actually reproduced that condition. Audiences were immersed in the enfolding dreamlike significance of Chinese history creating an apolitical moment of harmony of *One World, One Dream*.

Conclusion

For the first time in recent history, individual Westerners are invited to enter not only the geographical territory, but also the liminal space of the Chinese; to enter through the virtual space of hyperreality to experience a journey through contemporary representation of ancient Chinese history, becoming participants in the ritual connection of Man with Heaven (Nature) through the Olympic Opening. It is no surprise that while Westerners were immersed in and amused by the Opening, they were also placed in a seemingly unfamiliar context that was actually partly reshaped by them and for them. It is a context in part a Western imagination of Chinese aesthetics. Such a unique experience offered them a copy of the China it has always wanted, but not a copy that really fulfils their desires.

In a Western context, CCTV is considered a branding organisation marketing the international profile of China. Yet the behind-the-scenes documentary series (Zhu,

²⁰ Also note Rana (2008, August 9, para. 4): "This harmony was reflected in the rising Olympic rings during the gala: a symbol of all countries rising hand-in-hand to achieve peace and prosperity"

²¹ I interpreted and translated the ideas from the Chinese.

2008) does reveal the creative and aesthetic aims of the Beijing Olympic Opening Ceremony (Gunts & Ebersol, 2008). Internet discussion of the Olympic Games and the Opening, however, did not necessarily represent the opinion of the general population in China (EastSouthWestNorth, n.d.) or indeed of the general population in any Western nation. Bringing these two types of content - research and Internet contributors' opinions – together in this paper has initiated a discourse of openness instead of one of closedness. Behind the aesthetics of collectivism, and through the simulacra of Chinese classical philosophical aesthetics, China has presented to the world a contemporary profile via a hyperreality experience.

In the past 30 years, the Chinese nation and its culture have been constantly in the midst of change at a significant pace, striving for modernisation. Through the cultural unfolding of the Olympic Games in Beijing, China signified its strive for a determined re-arrangement of political and economic territory.

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