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By Haiyan Lee

The most clichéd way of referring to the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games in English-language media has been “China’s coming-out party.” The slightly condescending undertone is nonetheless mingled with well-wishing that the debutante will give the world a heck of a party, the glitches and disappointments in the run-up notwithstanding. For this precious moment, China chose Zhang Yimou, arguably its most talented film director, to chaperone itself onto the world stage.

By all indications, it was a good choice. The 50-minute multi-million-dollar extravaganza was so spectacular that the only appropriate response, it would seem, was a WOW! Or to wonder, like one American volleyball player did, “How did they do that?” Any more parsing would seem pedantic. But, alas, this is the age of “have computer, will blog.” So let’s begin with the New York Times piece that hails the event as a wild success with “signature Chinese touches.” There is no denying that the lavish ceremony was first and foremost about China. And the China it celebrated was ancient (the 5000-year history), civilized (the arts and crafts), inventive (the four great inventions), adventurous (the silk roads), hospitable (the Confucian chant about cherishing guests from afar), technologically accomplished (the astronaut), and innocent and hopeful (the school children). It wore love, peace, and harmony proudly on its sleeve. What more could the world ask for?

Dutiful commentators will likely remind us what this dazzling propaganda blockbuster conceals: the human rights abuses, the suppression of ethnic/regional autonomy, the rise of xenophobic nationalism, the environmental degradation, the widening gap between rich and poor, the unholy alliances with authoritarian regimes elsewhere, and so on. However, not every skeleton has been stuffed into the national closet. In fact, the ceremony openly paraded the specter of another China that should in theory jar the domestic revelers and besotted observers alike: Mao’s China.

Everything about the Beijing Olympics was meant to sweep you off your feet. But above all, it was the number of performers—15,000—in the opening ceremony that probably caused many an eye to pop and jaw to drop. Given how much of the “Chineseness” in the program belonged to the category of “invented” or at least airbrushed tradition, the surreally synchronized movements of thousands of people was perhaps the most “signature” of the Chinese touches. The antecedents are much closer in history and more vivid in memory: we need only recall the images of mass formations dressed in regulation garb, chanting in unison, marching in lockstep, waving the little red book, or doing what George Orwell calls “physical jerks.” To date, only the North Koreans can rival the Chinese in staging such spectacles of sheer numbers. It is the totalitarian aesthetic at its most beguiling and frightening. It is the power of ritual.
A new book called *Ritual and Its Consequences* argues that ritual is a quintessential human activity because it creates an "as if" world in which identities are made, boundaries tested, and human potentialities stretched. It can be used by rulers to solidify the existing order, or by the malcontent to imagine alternative worlds. The Chinese Communist Party, since its days of fighting guerrilla warfare in the countryside, has tapped the powers of ritual with consummate skill: it famously invented the ritual of *fanshen* (turning over) to denounce the ancien regime and the social order it presided over; and it mandated (and to some extent still does) mass participation in a numbing array of state-orchestrated rituals (such as mass rallies) to cultivate loyalty and conformity.

The Party understands well the transformative power of ritual: it can goad a timid peasant to point an accusing finger at a local despot, inspire saintly acts of self-sacrifice in an ordinary person, or make schoolgirls savagely beat their teacher to death. Zhang Yimou, too, has understood this well since his days as a cinematographer. The 1980s classic, *Yellow Earth* (directed by Chen Kaige, with Zhang as cinematographer), already gives us a good taste of Zhang’s passion for mass rituals leavened with bold colors and primal music. In a brief but powerful scene set in Yan’an, the Party’s headquarters during the war of resistance against Japan, a large assembly of men in peasant jackets and white turbans dance to the stirring beat of waist-drums, kicking up clouds of dust and a delirious atmosphere of festivity. They are sending off new Red Army recruits who file past with red ribbons tied across their torsos—after the bridegroom’s fashion at rural weddings. The scene is a potent reminder that it was the Party’s ability to absorb folk arts and rituals into its political theater, as much as its Marxist-Leninist ideology and military know how, that enabled it to sweep into power in 1949.

To be sure, the film ends on a subversive note of skepticism, showing a huge gathering of peasants prostrating on the parched yellow earth in a rain-seeking ritual and then surging forth in a direction away from the far horizon where the protagonist and communist soldier Gu Qing reappears after a period of absence. The ending suggests that the Party saves neither the girl (Cuiqiao) from the fate of arranged marriage, nor the peasants in general from the blight of poverty and ignorance. Such discordant moments, however, are rare in Zhang’s later, martial arts epics. Beginning with *Hero*, Zhang seems enthralled by what Susan Sontag calls “fascinatin’ fascism,” or power dressed up as splendid spectacles. Repeatedly, he knocks us dead with glorious mise-en-scènes of ancient humanity, surprisingly agile in their quaintly cumbersome accoutrements not unlike those worn by portions of the opening ceremony performers, carrying out the will of a tyrant with unstoppable menace. These are the films that have at last turned a profit for Zhang and endeared him to the authorities. They are seductive in the same way that films about the Nazi aesthetics of pomp and violence have perversely held audiences’ attention worldwide for decades.
It is no accident that a *New York Times* profile of Zhang Yimou calls him China’s Leni Riefenstahl. Whether or not the analogy is fair, Zhang’s success owes as much to an iron-fisted regime that loves grandeur as to our irrepressible fascination with aestheticized and ritualized politics, particularly its ability to galvanize people to achieve the seemingly impossible. In comparison, democratic politics (unless it resorts to imperialist, shock’n’awe-style violence against a “rogue” nation) is hopelessly drab and tedious—how on earth does one turn C-Span into a visually stunning and emotionally arousing spectacle? The same book on ritual mentioned earlier asserts that modern western societies cling to the virtue of sincerity and authenticity out of a profound distrust of ritual. Ritual appears to many as empty formality devoid of genuine feeling. But this doesn't mean that we are immune to its allures of creativity, theatricality, and communality, or its promise to lift us out of our private, atomized existence.

Somewhat reassuringly, China has chosen a sporting event, rather than war or conquest, as its rite of passage, transposing its mass rituals from Tiananmen Square to the National Stadium, affectionately known as the Bird’s Nest. Sports, along with cinema, pretty much remains the only legitimate domain where our appetite for grand spectacle can be safely satisfied. Hence the nearly universal insistence that the Olympics is not about politics and should not be politicized. But as the organizers and would-be protesters are well aware, ritual takes us to an “as if” world where there are as many dreams as there are people and where the joust to control meaning is nothing if not political.
So is not the motto for the Beijing Olympics, “One world, one dream,” a tad naive? It’s a beautiful ideal, but it ill prepares one for the inconvenient fact of human plurality and the inevitable clashes of desires and interests. Might not “Many dreams, a single planet” better serve China as well as the rest of the world?

*Images from The New York Times.*

Tags: The 2008 Beijing Olympics