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Geremie R. Barme
Australian National University

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Painting Over Mao: Notes on the Inauguration of the Beijing Olympic Games

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By Geremie R. Barmé

The ancient city of Beijing was literally turned on its head to help achieve the effects of the Olympic opening ceremony on Friday August 8, 2008. Six hundred years ago the city was designed around a north-south axis that runs from the south of the old city through the Forbidden City and on north. Along this axis the spectacles of imperial times would unfold (including the imperial "Tours of the South" or *nanxun* that were a major feature of the reigns of the Kangxi and Qianlong emperors in the Qing dynasty). Since the 1910s, however, Chang'an Avenue, now a multi-laned highway that runs east-west through the heart of Beijing, became the focus for military parades. From the 1950s, mass rallies organized by China's ruling Communist Party have paraded along the avenue past Tiananmen, the most recent of these grand demonstrations being held in 1999 to mark the 50th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic (see my essay "[Let the Spiel Begin](#)").

As part of the makeover of the city in the last decade the long-disused north-south imperial axis has been revived with a rebuilt city gate far in the south and a new park at Yongding Men, as well as a lengthy shopping mall at Qianmen that abuts Tiananmen Square. On Friday night as a prelude to the start of the Olympic opening ceremony a line of fireworks exploded in a series of "footprints" along this axis describing a path to the Bird's Nest National Stadium.

Far in advance of this the ceremony designers created a digital mock up of the fireworks so that TV viewers in China and internationally could see an idealized version of Beijing's central axis. To achieve the desired effect they even edited out the pollution-haze that generally covers the city despite years of effort and billions of dollars. The show that followed was also one of canny artifice, stunning design and digital wizardry. Zhang Yimou, the renowned filmmaker and overall director of the show, used a quotation from Mao Zedong to describe the thinking behind the opening: "using the past to serve the present and the foreign to serve China."

Most observers noted that Mao, the Party Chairman who founded the People's Republic in 1949 and led the country until his death in 1976 (launching the disastrous Great Leap Forward in the late 50s and the decade of disruption of the Cultural Revolution from 1966) was entirely absent from this paean to China's past civilization. Of course, they might have missed the pregnant absence of the dead leader in the heavily rewritten "Song to the Motherland" (*Gechang zuguo* 歌唱祖国), in which he originally featured, that was mimed by nine-year-old Lin Miaoke 林妙可 that opens the show (the real singer was Yang Peiyi 杨沛宜, who was excluded on the grounds that she was not suitably photogenic). However, in reality, the Great Helmsman did get a look in, if only obliquely.

On the unfurled paper scroll that features centre stage early in the performance, dancers trace out a painting in the "*xieyi*" 写意, or impressionistic, style of traditional Chinese art. Their lithe movements create a vision of mountains and a river, to which is added a sun. It is a something of a stock scene of the kind seen in countless Chinese ink paintings. However, to my mind at least, it is an image that also evokes the painting-mural that forms a backdrop to the statue of the Chairman in the Mao Memorial Hall in the centre of Beijing (another version of this image hung prominently in the Great Hall of the People from the 1960s). That picture, designed by Huang Yongyu 黄永玉, a noted artist persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, is, in turn, inspired by a line from Mao's most famous poem 'Snow' 沁园春·雪 (February 1936) that reads "How splendid the rivers and mountains of China" (*jiangshan ru ci duo jiao* 江山如此多娇). The poem lists the prominent rulers of dynastic China and ends by commenting on how all these great men fade in comparison to the true heroes of the modern world: the people. The poem is generally interpreted as being about Mao himself, the hero of the age (for a discussion of this, see my book [Shades of Mao](#), 1996).

In their opening ceremony design, what Zhang Yimou and his colleagues achieve (among many, sometimes too many, other things), be it intentional or not, is a rethinking of this reference.

Eventually, the painting is colored in by children with brushes and the sun becomes a jaunty “smiley face.” In the remaining blank space of the landscape the athletes of the world track the rainbow of Olympic colors as they take up their positions following their entry to the stadium. Thus, a Chinese landscape, with its coded political references (after all, what does a sun usually mean in modern-style *guohua* 国画?), is transformed into something that is suffused with a new and embracing meaning by the global community. It offers a positive message for the future of China’s engagement with the world, not only to international audiences, but perhaps also to China’s own leaders, who, apart from Premier Wen Jiabao, for the most part sat stony-faced through the extravaganza. It is also significant that many of the high-points of the opening ceremony were the result of a collective collaboration of designers working closely with Chinese artists who have returned from long years overseas, as well as with British and Japanese creators.

But after the spectacular highlights of traditional China that feature the Four Great Inventions (the segment on moveable type, in particular, is a triumph), powerful images jostle with each other, or appear momentarily only to be crowded out as one mass scene after another presses in, or some vignette comes and goes in a flood of fleeting glitz. The Chinese voice-over on CCTV1 spoke repeatedly about traditional aesthetics and the language of understatement and elegance, but after an enthralling and uplifting introduction and paean to the achievements of dynastic Chinese civilization, as the show enters the present age a certain failure of artistic coherence becomes increasingly obvious.

Thus, one could argue that the extraordinary landscape painting contains another, quite unintended, message. The “*xieyi*” style of Chinese art particularly values emptiness or lacunae (*kong* 空 or *xu* 虚, the spaces in paintings are also known as *liubai* 留白): those pregnant spaces untouched by the brush that bring the composition to life, the “vacuum” in which meaning finds full expression. In the second half of the show that inaugurated the XXIXth Olympiad with its increasing number of rapid highlights—the problematic use of the intense close-up drowned by the massing of performers—there is scarce room and an unsteady rhythm in what could have been, and in parts still is, a breathtaking work. The exciting promise of the opening sequences remains sadly under-realized.

While Zhang Yimou had overall directorial authority for the design and staging of the opening ceremony, Zhang Jigang 张继钢, deputy minister of propaganda in the PLA General Logistics Department who had worked on the Chinese ceremony at the Athens Games, was in charge of the first half of the show. The second half (including the entrance of the athletes and the torch-lighting ceremony) was overseen by Chen Weiya 陈维亚, artistic director of the generally stodgy Song & Dance Ensemble of the East (东方歌舞团). He has also designed the closing ceremony. Chen is known for the designs he has made for Tiananmen Square mass gatherings, the 2001 World University Student Games and the opening ceremony of the 2005 East Asia Games. Apart from the push-and-pull of directorial intent created by this leadership team, there were other expectations that had to be met. For example, the Beijing Olympic Games is also a vehicle for the promotion of the au courant Party line of ‘harmony’ (*hexie* 和谐), be it local or global. The original show was to feature a scene comprising a massed army of huge “*piying*” 皮影 (screen puppet) Terracotta Warriors made in the style of Shaanxi Qinqiang 秦腔 Opera puppets. Images of these figures featured in the media following the first rehearsal of the show in July this year. Recalling not only the era of the First Emperor of the Qin, but also Zhang Yimou’s 2002 film “Hero,” the phalanx of puppets was designed to perform a victory march in the stadium. They were cut from the show on advice from the Beijing Olympic Committee who deemed that they were too martial in tone. The internationally recognized Qin Warriors were replaced at the last minute by puppets made up as Beijing Opera performers. They feature in a lacklustre scene that has been widely derided by Chinese bloggers and Beijing viewers.

So, to my mind, while there was much to commend the performance in terms of scale and synchronized collective performance, after we leave the retrospect on pre-modern China (one in which the narrative about millennia of peace, exchange, harmony and friendship is problematic in other ways) coherence is sacrificed for the sake of a number of designed-by-committee themes. Meanwhile, the sardonic wit, irony and general raffishness of Beijing humor are noteworthy for their complete absence from the festivities.

The general busyness of the action and the overall bling that detract from the moments of magic in the show contain perhaps a significant cultural message in their own right. Quotations from Confucius or the repeated talk of harmony do little to disguise a paucity that is not about either “xu” or aesthetic restraint, a vision in which less is allowed to be more. At least China has the wherewithal to talk about the value of pregnant pauses and the richness of the empty space, in previous Olympic opening ceremonies, such as those held in the US and Australia, there was simply too much clamour and *horror vacui*.

Immediately after the Beijing ceremony one Chinese web blogger commented, “We’ve been waiting for this banquet for a long time. Instead what we got was hot-pot in which all the flavors have ended up confused.” People will debate the contents and significance of this particular visual banquet for some time to come. Despite all this, what does remain is a Chinese painting in which the whole world, through its athletes, has helped co-create.

Geremie R. Barmé is a professor of Chinese history at The Australian National University. His latest book is [The Forbidden City](#) (Harvard University Press, 2008). A shorter version of this article appeared in [Sydney Morning Herald](#) on August 11, 2008.

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