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Big and Small Nation(alisms): A view from Aotearoa-New Zealand

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This is the fourth installment in our series of views of the Olympic Games from around the world. Here, Paola Voci, a senior lecturer in the Chinese Language Programme at the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand, reflects on her mixed national affiliations, and how they affected her viewing of the opening ceremonies.

By Paola Voci

And so it was. All as expected; all that is indeed the stereotypical China: the long civilization, the characters, the Confucian traditions, the big inventions, the huge number of people, and of course the fireworks. Zhang Yimou copied and pasted it all together so that the audience—both “them” and “us”—could safely enjoy familiar images, saturated with spectacular effects.

And there I was watching it all on TV like billions of others, an Italian “sinologist” turned into a Chinese film and media researcher in the USA, who ultimately landed in New Zealand five years ago to teach about China in Dunedin, at the very bottom of Aotearoa’s South Island.

China and the Olympics have not been particularly big in the Kiwi news—only the *New Zealand Herald* and the *Dominion Press* have put it on the front page as the main event today. But of course, yesterday night [TVONE](#) had to cover it all and from 9:30 pm until 4:30 am New Zealand turned its attention to China as “she was taking over the world stage” (as one of the commentators, the Chinese-born Sophie Zhang, mentioned).

China is still strangely a remote country here. I say “strangely” not only because Prime Minister Helen Clark was the first “western” leader to sign a free trade agreement with China, but also because Chinese are the first minority in Aotearoa and are likely to surpass Maori in numbers in the next few years. Yet, multiculturalism and intercultural communications are still slow to grow in a country where *biculturalism*, although officially embraced, is still very much contested. For instance, despite their growing presence—especially in Auckland—and their impact on national culture and economy, the Chinese in New Zealand have not yet found a strong diasporic voice in Kiwi culture (with very few exceptions in the world of the arts: the poet/writer [Alison Wong](#) or the filmmaker [Roseanne Liang](#)). In NZ media, Chinese and Asians more broadly are seldom visible. In other words, yesterday was quite an exceptional day, as China literally occupied national media as a mighty protagonist for several hours and the Olympics literally acted as a rush introductory course on Chinese culture (as the TVONE commentators themselves declared: “that has truly been a learning experience”).

Before the live coverage began on TVONE, as I was channel browsing I caught a bit of a popular news program “[Campbell Live](#)” (TVTHREE). The short reportage on the Olympics really captured the way that many Kiwi still relate to China. The correspondent in Beijing was an absolute parody of journalism. She, of course, did not speak any Chinese, but she was quite happy to advertise it as perfectly natural (why on earth would NZ Television have wanted to send to China a journalist who could actually speak Chinese?). She smiled and noted how nice it was that everybody spoke English to her and how great it was that in fact she did not need to speak Mandarin—that alien language that English-speaking people could not (or would not want to?) learn. And how grateful she was that even the taxi-driver could speak some English and even gave himself an English name! He took her around Beijing, in those “complicated” streets—because you know “it is so complicated here” (of course anybody who had ever been in Beijing would know in fact, that aside of the horrible traffic and the very few *hutong* now left in the city, BJ’s streets are quite “uncomplicated.” Has she ever tried to drive in any medieval-conceived town in Italy or to walk around Venice?

I was getting quite irritated with this correspondent and her coverage of the 160,00 registered marriages on the lucky Olympic day (I am not sure how many times I subsequently heard the wrong reference to how the number 8 “means” “wealth” in Chinese...Nobody, not even the “real” Chinese

Sophie Zhang, bothered to gave the correct pronunciation of “8” and the explanation with the quasi-homophone character...).

I turned to TVONE where the before-the-ceremony programming included an interview with Edwin Maher (an Australian news reporter who used to work for NZ Broadcasting and is now [CCTV English Channel news reader](#)). He could not believe that from his *humble* beginnings he had now landed such a prestigious job. He dismissed accusations of being “a mouthpiece of the government” and noted that, yes, CCTV is state television, but greater freedom has been achieved by the Chinese media in the past few years. He quoted the coverage of the Sichuan earthquake as evidence of a changed attitude to news broadcasting in China. While I do tend to agree with him that the media coverage of the earthquake was remarkably truthful and literally mobilized millions of people both in and outside of China in the efforts to help survivors, when it comes to CCTV’s freedom I am less optimistic than Mr. Maher.

But Edwin Maher’s humble attitude is at the core of something else I wanted to note about the Kiwi perspective on China. Let me get to my point about big and small nationalisms. It is obvious that the Olympic opening ceremony was a proud display of nationalism for China. Every little detail in the choreographed spectacle was designed to emphasize the rhetoric of the *one China* with her many ethnic minorities, as well as the *one China* facing great challenges thanks to the solidarity and strength of its people. Among the challenges that the ceremony most directly referred to were the battles to achieve unprecedented economic growth and overcome terrible natural disasters (other human-caused disasters which in fact deeply wounded and divided the nation needed to be left out). The *one China* rhetoric was also well-reflected in one of the least noticeable choices of the Olympic organizers: as the 600-plus Chinese athletes finally walked into the stadium, the French and English speakers announced the arrival of the team of the “People’s Republic of China,” but the Chinese speaker simply said “Zhongguo – China.”

So while it is clear to me the type of nationalism that was shown on my TV screen from a Chinese perspective, I found myself reflecting on how “my” NZ commentators were both in admiration but also somehow suspicious of this grandeur. From a Kiwi’s perspective, such a display of spectacular nationalism is both impressive and at odds with some of the most defining traits of the New Zealand spirit: Kiwis’ dignified humbleness, and their friendly low-keyness.

Before the ceremony, an inside look to the International Media centre revealed to the Kiwi audience that the American NBC network just by itself had one entire floor – “3000 of them!”; the camera then took us down to the basement, where the small TVNZ team worked happily and humbly. They noted that in the Kiwi camp there is “no Starbucks or Mc Donald’s,” clearly distancing themselves from the American way of doing things and reclaiming a much more down-to-earth Kiwi way. On a similar note, before the ceremony, another news reporter interviewed Kiwi about the haka—should all the athletes perform them? It used to be only a trademark of the All Blacks, but increasingly other sport teams and individuals have adopted the traditional Maori haka. People smiled and overwhelmingly indicated that they would love to see more haka—this small but powerful display of New Zealand pride. No special effects, no sophisticated fireworks, just bodies and voices. (Among the many haka videos available on YouTube, here is [one with Japanese commentators](#), another with [French Commentators](#).)

After only five years, I can hardly call myself a Kiwi. Yet, I found myself thinking that if “we” were to host the Olympics, it would be really nice to welcome “you” with a huge, four million person haka. But of course Maori protocol would not allow women (or foreigners?!) to join in...

As the ceremony unfolded and New Zealand and Italy happened to walk into the stadium one after the other (that was done I am sure just for my benefit – thanks, Zhang Yimou!), I quickly abandoned my own personal moment of imagined Kiwi nationalism. As I was watching some of the Italian team members lingering behind and being pushed by the kind but firm organizers to move on, I said out loud (in Italian): “i soliti Italiani casinisti” (there, the usual chaotic Italians)...this time more “appropriately” recognizing myself as an Italian and allowing myself to laugh at one of “our” national stereotypes.

But it was too late for me to elaborate on this other nationalist thought with a more sophisticated analysis. Finally, the speeches began. No translation was given for the president of Beijing's Olympic organizing committee's speech—as if all Kiwis could in fact understand what he was saying. The commentators stayed silent. I guess they could not marvel at how great it was that everybody spoke English and that they did not need to speak Mandarin as the news journalist on TV3 had just done before. As Jacques Rogge's speech began, they simply started to talk again, praising Mr. Rogge's warning against cheating and doping.

Then the hero's (indeed a true Zhang Yimou's *Hero*) finale. With no title credits, the show ended (and of course began).

Tags: [The 2008 Beijing Olympics](#)