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Duelling Dreams at the 2008 Beijing Olympics

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Jim Leibold originally developed this piece on Chinese and Western viewpoints on the Beijing Olympics for use in his teaching; he's adapted it here for the China Beat audience.

By Jim Leibold

This year is China's year. On the 8th day of the 8th month at 8pm, it will light the flame of the [29th Olympics Games](#)—bringing not only the world's athletes to Beijing but also thousands of foreign visitors and millions more through the massive global media contingency that will descend on the



capital.

What will the media spotlight capture? The luster of an ancient civilization and emerging superpower as many in China hope; or the darker, seedier corners of an authoritarian yet fragile party-state as many in the West suspect.

According to the Chinese government, the Olympics games have never been about politics and nor should the Beijing Games. The Games are all about sports: the principles of peace, fair play, friendship, honour and glory on the track and in the pool. The Games are about cultivating and spreading the "Olympic Spirit" and "Olympic Culture" throughout China and the wider world.


But in reality the Games have always been about politics. One only has to recall Hitler's showcase Berlin Olympics of 1936, the tragic deaths at the Munich Olympics in 1972, or the boycotts of the Montreal, Moscow and Los Angeles games. And the Beijing Olympics are shaping up to be the mother of all political events: as different global constituencies compete for resources, power and influence (not to mention money) in the main event as the athletes go for gold on the sidelines.

If we hope to understand the significance of the Olympic-size struggle that is playing out on the front pages of our newspapers, online chat-rooms and city streets in the lead up to the Beijing Games, we need to first contextualize (dare I say essentialize) the two contrasting worldviews at play here. I would like to suggest that the ongoing controversy surrounding the Games is a reflection of two competing social imaginaries which go well beyond the swimming pool and the track and are deeply rooted in how China sees its place in the world and how the rest of the world views China.

Competing Worldviews: China

Despite China's rising economic and political muscle, it still views itself as a victim of the international system. Modern history as it is taught in Chinese classrooms begins with the 1840 Opium War. And the story of how the British government ordered a military attack on the forces of Qing China because



one of its official s, Lin Zexue, dared to destroy the British opium supplies that were poisoning its youth and destroying its economy. This was the opening salvo on what the Chinese rightfully remember as the “century of humiliation.”

From Sun Yat-sen to Mao Zedong, Chinese leaders called on their people to “wake up” and throw off their slavish mentality so that they could once again stand up in front of the world. This narrative of national victimhood and the resulting struggle for national dignity is perhaps most clearly symbolized by the apocryphal sign which supposedly forbade dogs and Chinese from entering Huangpu Park in the foreign concessions of late 19th century Shanghai.

Although the sign appears to have never existed (at least as a posted placard), the very idea of its existence circulated widely among turn of the century Chinese nationalists, who used it as a highly emotive example of the humiliation the Chinese were suffering at the hands of the foreign imperialists. Take for example Li Weiqing’s 1907 appeal:

“On the banks of the Huangpu river the foreigners have set up a garden where the green grass is like carpet and the flowers like silks and satins. People from all countries of the world are admitted, even Indians who have lost their country, indeed even the dogs of foreigners are admitted. Only Chinese are not allowed to go there. Foreigners despise us so much, they regard us as more base than slaves, horses and dogs...So it can be seen that in the modern world only power counts. We should exert ourselves to obliterate this disgraceful humiliation.”

For many Chinese living both at home and abroad, this struggle for national dignity continues today, making another imaginary scene—this time from Bruce Lee’s 1972 film *Fist of Fury*—a source of great inspiration and hope. Set in 1930s Shanghai, where the Chinese faced not only the oppression of the West but also the rising militarism of their fellow Asian neighbours Japan, Bruce Lee fights back on behalf of his nation and people, defeating the Japanese traitors and destroying the symbol of foreign insult:

VIDEO 1: “no dogs and Chinese allowed”:

But didn’t this “century of humiliation” end in 1949 with the Communist revolution? After all Mao had claimed that the Chinese people had finally stood up from the rostrum at Tiananmen Square. Yet, the chaos of the Cultural Revolution left China looking like the “joker in the pack” of the international system. When Mao died in 1976, China was still one of the poorest countries in the world, with an average caloric intake lower than those experienced in the Auschwitz death camp if we are to believe Jung Chang and Jon Halliday.

China has come a long way since 1976. Proud of their country’s achievements over the last three decades, most Chinese look to the 2008 Olympics with a sense of rising confidence. For them, the Olympics is about pride and dignity: the reversal of historical wrongs and the restoration of a once proud and mighty nation. Today’s Chinese youth are extremely patriotic and highly sensitive of any criticism which seems to hark back to the bad old days when their countrymen were viewed as backward, yellow-skin coolies.

Competing Worldviews: The West

Yet, outside China, the world continues to look at the “dragon” with a combination of fear and desire.

On the one hand, the West has long looked to Asia with a lust for the exotic and the erotic: the lost



and hidden realm of Shangri-la and the fragile submissiveness of the Oriental beauty. In the ancient traditions of the East, and in particular its Tibetan incarnation, the West has long sought an escape from the brutal realities of Western modernity: its wars, its poverty, its social atomization.

This desire for escape was brilliantly captured in James Hilton's 1933 novel, *Lost Horizon*, which told the story of British diplomat Hugh Conway's discovery of the hidden paradise of Shangri-la deep within the Himalayan mountains of Tibet, where he found love, happiness and, most importantly, meaning. This hugely successful paperback was made into an academy award winning movie in 1937 by leading Hollywood director Frank Capra and then remade into a dreadful, almost comical, musical in 1973 with a memorable Burt Bacharach score. It didn't seem to matter that the wise High Lama was a Belgium friar named Father Perrault nor that the only Tibetans or Chinese depicted in the film version were played by Western or Japanese actors. For both the book and the films represented a sort of Western fantasy, a postmodern simulacra, where one could sing and dance without the troubles of war, disease or those "dirty Orientals" getting in one's way:

VIDEO 2: "Lost Horizon 1973 Remake":

In the final scene from the 1973 remake, Conway has escaped from an Indian hospital in an effort to get back to Shangri-La while American government officials (he's American in the remake, of course) attempt to bring him back home. Asked if he believes Shangri-la exists, the Indian doctor replies: "Yes. Yes, I believe it. I believe it because I want to believe it." In other words, there is no need to concern yourself with the reality of China or Tibet when you can create your own version of Shangri-la in the back lots of a Burbank studio.

Yet this desire for the lost wisdom and beauties of the East has been accompanied by an equally strong fear of its "Yellow Hordes" and looming "Yellow Peril." There is a long history of anti-Chinese racism and migration exclusionism which is deeply rooted in the histories of Australia, America and other Western nation-states.

Like Hilton's *Lost Horizon*, the fictional character of another English novelist tapped into this fear of the menacing Oriental: Sax Rohmer's evil criminal genius Dr. Fu Manchu. In his first book, *The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu* (1913), Rohmer wrote:

"Imagine a person, tall, lean and feline, high-shouldered, with a brow like *Shakespeare* and a face like *Satan*, ... one giant intellect, with all the resources of science past and present ... Imagine that awful being, and you have a mental picture of Dr. Fu-Manchu, the *yellow peril* incarnate in one man."

One of Fu's greatest agents was his daughter, Fah Lo Suee or "Sweet Perfume," who seduced and then tortured Western man in Rohmer's 1930 *The Daughter of Fu Man Chu*. Here the fear of pain mixed with the masochistic tickle of pleasure:

VIDEO 3: "I Am The Daughter of Fu Manchu by Charong Chow":

In sum, we can best understand the ongoing political drama surrounding the Beijing Olympics as a clash of competing worldviews: for the Chinese, the games are a battle ground for upholding national dignity and the rewriting of past historical crimes; for the West, the games are yet another opportunity for it to project its unrealistic fantasies of fear and desire on the Chinese people.

Now, let me see if I can explain what I mean in further detail by taking a closer look at some of the ways that the Games have been politicized both inside and outside of China. Here my aim is to demonstrate how these two radically different social imaginaries are shaping the language and actions of different actors during China's Olympic moment.

A Game of Cat and Mouse

Since its initiation during the controversial 1936 Berlin Olympics, the torch relay has always been one of the more colorful and symbolic acts of the games, as well as its most overtly political. But the Chinese have taken the relay to a new level: on what was originally dubbed the torch's 130-day, 137,000-kilometer "journey of harmony." Not only did they hope to stage the longest relay in Olympic history—with over 20,000 torch bearers carrying the torch to over 20 countries on 5 continents



before finally encircling (or rather literally enclosing) the Chinese nation-state, including its highest and lowest points in Mount Everest and the Tarim basin in Xinjiang.

Yet, as all are aware, the torch's journey around the globe has been anything but harmonious. From the moment it was lit in Athens, the torch has been dogged by controversy. First in London, then Paris and San Francisco, pro-Tibetan independence groups attempted to douse, grab and disrupt the torch while a group of ex-Chinese army strongmen and national police tried to escort it through chaotic city streets. As more than one commentator has pointed out, the entire relay descended into a comic book style farce, with organizers forced to take last minute detours, freeway "jogs," or laps around a lockdown stadiums or parks to avoid protestors.

For most Westerners, the relay is all about freedom of speech and the right of the individual: the right of athletes and others to criticize the human rights abuses that they claim are occurring in Tibet and elsewhere in China. Take for example, the actions of American environmental advocate Majora Carter, who was selected as one of the torch bearers for the San Francisco leg of the relay. When she attempted to pull out a small Tibetan flag from her sleeve, she was pounced on. In her words:

"The Chinese security and cops were on me like white on rice, it was no joke. They pulled me out of the race, and then San Francisco police officers pushed me back into the crowd on the side of the street."

As the below video reveals, Carter seemed to be more offended by the denial of her own freedom of speech than anything that was happening in Tibet:

Video 4: "Olympic Torch Bearer Removed For Carrying Tibetan Flag":

For most Chinese, however, the often comic kaffuffle surrounding the relay has been deeply felt, and personally insulting. This sense of anger propelled 27 year-old, disabled fencer Jin Jing into the national spotlight. Dubbed by Chinese netcitizens "the Smiling Angel in Wheelchair," Jin Jing tenaciously clung to the torch from her wheel chair as several protestors attempted to wrestle it from her hands during the Paris leg of the relay. And as the following YouTube montage reveals, these heroics have transformed her into a national hero:

Video 5: "Jin Jing Chinese National Hero":

Boycotting the Games

While the Chinese see the Olympics as a sort of coming-out-party and showcase for Chinese national pride, others have used the spotlight to highlight any number of beefs they have against the Chinese state. Many of these groups have adopted a very slick, PR-style approach to their protests, one which makes full use of the multimedia potentials of the internet. Take for example the following:

Video 6: "Olympic Boycott ad":

In their campaigns, these e-activists have either re-packaged the five cute and cuddly Olympic mascots, the fuwa or "friendlies," or manipulated the Game's official motto, "One world, One dream," and its associated logo. And it seems that there is no shortage of causes that they are fighting for: global warming; religious freedom; labour rights; unfair trade; human rights; press freedom; and even animal cruelty.

The two most vocal groups have been the [Dream for Darfur](#) NGO backed by actress Mia Farrow and [Students for a Free Tibet](#) headed up by the Canadian-Tibetan activist Lhadon Tethong.

In a 2007 *Wall Street Journal* [op-ed piece](#), Mia Farrow dubbed the Beijing games the "Genocide Olympics" due to the Beijing government's continued support for th



the Khartoum regime and their ethnic cleansing of the non-Arab tribes in the Darfur region of Western Sudan. While Beijing claimed that it was “an insult to the Olympic spirit to wantonly blame China for the Darfur crisis,” it also dispatched a special envoy to the region to pressure the Sudanese government into agreeing to a UN peacekeepers force. Yet, with only a handful of peacekeepers on the ground due to continued foot-dragging in Khartoum, the group has kept the heat on. In February, it claimed its first major scalp when Steven Spielberg [announced](#) that he was resigning from his role as a special adviser to the Game’s opening ceremony, claiming that China must do more to pressure its African ally over the Darfur crisis.

As a global franchise of sorts, Students for a Free Tibet have launched a number of creative “direct action” campaigns across the globe aimed at rising awareness of China’s own “genocide” in Tibet. A year prior to the start of the games, they managed to unfurl a huge banner on the Great Wall of China, reading: “One World; One Dream; Free Tibet 2008.” They have also launched a campaign against the Olympic mascots, in particular the Tibetan antelope Yingying or Yingsel as she is known in Tibet. In June of 2007, they had the following press conference to announce that Yingsel had defected from the Olympic team:

Video 7: “Students for a Free Tibet Press Conference”:

While Yingsel might be in hiding, she isn’t hard to find on the internet: she has her own [website](#) and can be found networking on [Facebook](#) and [Myspace](#), and now even has her own [Pac-Man style game](#) where Chinese cops chase her around a maze as she searches for tsampa and momos in a quest for survival. On YouTube, Yingsel can also be seen taking on Olympic sponsors Coca-Cola:

Video 8: “Yingsel Thinks Coke Is GROSS”:

Selling the Games

Facing a PR crisis of disastrous proportions, the Chinese government hired the New York-based global communications consulting firm [Hill and Knowlton](#) to help it wrestle back the message from the activists. Their brief: repackage China as a kinder, gentler state—a “responsible stakeholder” and a modern superpower with a glorious past.

Domestically, Beijing’s charm offensive has focused on cultivating the “Olympic Spirit” among its citizens, as this advertorial demonstrates:

Video 9: “Catch the Olympic Spirit – CCTV Advertorial”:

And it seems to be working, if we are to believe official Chinese government statistics: 95% of Beijing citizen agree with their government’s handling of Olympic preparations, and the government has had little trouble filling the estimated 200,000 volunteer slots needed to guide foreign visitors and athletes around while keeping a watchful eye on any “suspicious behaviour.”

Internationally, Beijing's charm offensive has focused on re-packaging the ancient Occidental desire for the jewels of the Orient, albeit with a distinct postmodern twist. Dubbed the "Green Games; High-



tech Games; and People's Games," Beijing has set about reinventing its cityscape: a dozen or so new sports venues include the "Bird's Nest" and the "Water Cube"; an extended cross-city underground; a massive new airport terminal; a series of new, gleaming office buildings; an egg-shaped national theatre and; even the world's highest ferris wheel.

To spruce up the city's environment, the government has reportedly planted over 10 million trees around the city of Beijing while moving 200 factories outside the city confines. It now boasts that 90% of city buses and 70% of its cars run on clean burning LPG. The "Beijing Weather Modification Office" has even promised to produce clear skies for the games through cloud seeding. Yet, with the Games less than a month away, the city is still struggling to meet WHO guidelines for clean air.

But it is not all about high-rises and clean air, the organizers have also attempted to play to the Western desire for the traditional secrets of the Orient – Shangri-la with a distinctly post-Mao face. To some extent, one could argue, that it is about putting forward Chinese culture as a positive and palpable alternative to Hollywood-articulated Western modernity.

And here, the Chinese have brought in the big-guns, such as this promotional video for the games directed by the now world famous film director Zhang Yimou. As artistic director of the Opening Games, we can get a feel here for how Zhang wants to use the games to re-package Chinese culture:

Video 10: "Zhang Yimou Beijing Olympics Advertorial":

Some critics inside China have argued that this type of stereotypic and sentimental imagery only serves to cheapen the country's rich cultural heritage. Unmoved, Zhang has claimed that his opening ceremony "will offer 'Chinese cuisine' which suits foreigners' palates."

All this doesn't come cheap. It is estimated that the final price tag for staging the games will be somewhere in the range of US\$50 billion—over 10 times the cost of the Sydney games and more than 5 times the last games in Athens. But all this money appears to have done little to dampen the growing anxiety about what a rising China might mean for the future of the globe.

That was until the 7.9 magnitude earthquake struck Sichuan province on 12 May, killing nearly 100,000 people and leaving another 5 million homeless. The openness and speed with which the Chinese government responded to this crisis (especially when compared to the foot-dragging of the Burmese authorities) has helped to take some of the bite out of international criticism of China, at least for now. But it's uncertain whether this goodwill will outlast the Olympic flame.

Cyber Games

Olympic protest movements are nothing new, as I have already pointed out. Yet, in recent years, the battle ground has significantly shifted as new communication technologies have unleashed new

platforms and outlets for both activist groups and the state to get their messages out. The tragic outbreak of violent riots in Lhasa on March 14th and in surrounding Tibetan areas and the way in which these events were reported highlights how these new technologies have altered the landscape in which this ancient struggle between fear and desire is being played out.

Students for a Free Tibet has made extensive use of the Internet and other visual media to get images and information out of Tibet and spread word about what they see as the Communist regime's brutal response to these Tibetan "protests." To further their cause, they have created clever, eye-catching animations, such as this video:

Video 11: "Boycott Beijing Olympics":

But it is also about presenting much more graphic, disturbing and confronting videos, such as this recently released video (warning these images are quite disturbing):

Video 12: "[Students for a Free Tibet March 14th Video](#)":

By distributing and sharing these graphic images on the Internet, Students for a Free Tibet bypass the mainstream Western media (which would never contemplate showing such a video), thus taking their message directly to their target audience: the globally wired and connected youth.

In China, however, such confronting imagery is central to the government's propaganda on the Tibet riots. The blooded bodies are just different: Chinese rather than Tibetan. Take for example, this documentary which has been repeatedly shown on state-owned CCTV in China:

Video 13: "CCTV 3.14 Doco on Tibet":

Fed a steady diet of this type of highly emotive imagery, it is not surprising that few Chinese have any sympathy for the Tibetans and their international supporters. Rather, most Chinese believe that these continued attacks on their national dignity go well beyond a few radical fringe elements in the West. They have accused the mainstream Western media of bias in its coverage of the Tibetan riots, and it would appear with some merit (albeit minor when compared to China's propaganda machine). To highlight their claims, a group of Chinese net-citizens set up the website <http://www.anti-cnn.com/>, where they have sought to counter the pro-Tibet lobby.

In other words, in the lead up to the Beijing Olympics, these clashing worldviews are being played out daily not only on the world's streets but also increasingly in cyberspace. Spend a bit of time on youtube and you will get a feel for type of video jostling which continues on the Tibet issue.

Games for Sale

Finally, the Olympics are not only about politics and sports but also money: vast sums of it. The selling of the Beijing Games has recast that ancient Oriental desire to consume and possess the "Other" in a new economic light: the craving to hawk one's wares in the world's largest marketplace.



In the arena of global capitalism, the Beijing Games are truly big business—a virtual orgy of dollars and brands. And all the world’s leading multinational companies are planning to be there: Adidas, BHP Billiton, Coca-Cola, General Electric, Johnson & Johnson, Kodak, Lenovo, McDonald’s, Microsoft, Panasonic, Samsung, Visa and Volkswagen. Some have committed upwards of \$100 million dollars to put their goods and brands before China and the world’s consumers.

To land the sale, they have turned to familiar faces, Chinese stars such as Jackie Chan and Yao Ming who are just as well known in the West as they are in China itself. Take for example the follow Visa commercial:

Video 14: “Jackie Chan Olympic Commercial”:

The opening ceremony is expected to be the first TV sporting event watched live around the world by more than 4 billion people (1 billion of them in China itself) and the games will bring over half a million international tourists to China.

Multinational brands are using the event as an opportunity to build credibility and visibility with the booming Chinese consumer market. And unlike their Western counterparts, it appears that Chinese consumers are extremely brand conscious with one recent survey revealing that 68% of Chinese would be significantly more interested in brands that sponsor the world’s biggest sporting event.

Yet for most Olympic sponsors, the controversy surrounding the Beijing Games has become an Olympic-size headache. Activist groups like Dream for Darfur and Amnesty International have been making it difficult for these companies, calling in some case for a boycott of their products back home.

In November of last year, Dream for Darfur issued a report card on the Olympic sponsors, rating their actions, or rather inaction, on the issue of Darfur and what they claim is the Chinese government’s complicity in the crisis. In the report, 13 of the 19 top corporate sponsors were issued with a failing grade, including Kodak, Microsoft, BHP, and Visa. McDonald’s was the only company to escape with a satisfactory C grade.

Caught in a difficult catch-22 position, these companies risk losing consumers back home if they don’t address the concerns of these activist groups, but if they criticize Beijing, they also risk running foul of the Chinese government and jeopardizing their future in the world’s fastest growing consumer market. Thus far their strategy has been to join the Beijing government in stressing the apolitical nature of the games while highlighting their charitable record on other social issues around the globe.

China’s Olympic Moment

So how will China’s Olympic moment turn out? I think a couple of things are certain:

- 1) China will win the most gold medals—topping their performance in Athens where they won 32 gold medals to America’s 35;
- 2) Multinational companies will make heaps of money as they increase their brand profile in China;



- 3) International activists will stage creative protests and other forms of “direct action” in Beijing

during the Game which will be covered cautiously by international media outlets and completely ignored by the Chinese media;

4) The vast majority of Chinese people will continue to vigorously resist any attempts by “outside forces” to ruin China’s coming out party, or at least those attempts that they learn about through China’s great firewall of media censorship.

What remains unclear is just how significant the 2008 Beijing Olympics will be viewed in the history of China’s post-Mao era. Will it mark China’s ascendancy to global superpower status as the CCP hopes: what some academics have referred to as a global “power shift” from West to East? Or will it mark the beginning of the end to a brutal authoritarian yet fragile regime as many of its Western critics hope?

Nazi Germany won nine more gold medals than the USA at the 1936 Berlin Game and the Soviet Union won over 80 gold medals at the 1980 Moscow Olympics boycotted by the USA and others, but both regimes collapsed soon thereafter. While Japan and Korea won few medals at the 1968 Tokyo and 1988 Seoul Olympics, these games marked an important turning point in the economic and political development of these two Asia countries.

Which category will the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games fit into: Berlin and Moscow or Tokyo and Seoul? Time will tell.

Jim Leibold teaches at La Trobe University in Australia and recently published [Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism: How the Qing Frontier and Its Indigenes Became Chinese](#).

Tags: [The 2008 Beijing Olympics](#)