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9-4-2008

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Oakes, Timothy S., "Faking Heaven: The Utopian Will to Order in China" (2008). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 281.
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Faking Heaven: The Utopian Will to Order in China

September 4, 2008 in Uncategorized by [The China Beat](#) | [7 comments](#)

By Timothy S. Oakes

Now that the 2008 Olympics have come and gone, Beijing can perhaps breathe a sigh of relief that after two weeks of intensive scrutiny, the most embarrassing thing the foreign media could come up with during the Games was that some of the events in the spectacular opening ceremony were faked. First, we learned that 9-year old Lin Miaoke was not in fact singing a revised "Song of the Motherland" at all, but was lip-synching the voice of the less photogenic Yang Peiyi (see Geremie Barmé's "[Painting Over Mao](#)"). Then, we learned that at least some of the [firework footprints](#) leading up to the National Stadium were photo-shopped versions of one that had been done ahead of time. And finally, we learned all of the [children dressed in nationality costumes](#) were not minority children at all but Han Chinese. A few newscasters and pundits did their best to muster some shock (shock!) that the world had been hoodwinked into believing China could really pull off the perfection we saw on our television screens.

We tend to smell in fakery like this the whiff of scandal. The fake carries with it the stain of deception, of shame, even immorality. And yet, it turns out that fakery is an important part of our ability to imagine perfection. This is not because perfection is the opposite of fakery, but because perfection *depends* upon the fake. Only the real world is imperfect, blemished, and full of chaos and unpredictability. The fake world of televised opening ceremonies, by contrast, is dependable, predictable, and *orderly*. And while we may live in the messiness of the real world, we *yearn to believe* in the more ordered and dependable replica we see on television.

Of course, it also turned out that during the 2000 Olympics, [Sydney faked their opening ceremony too](#). The Sydney Symphony mimed its entire performance. In fact, some of it wasn't even the Sydney Symphony playing on the backing tape, but their archrival, the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. Such orchestral maneuvers, it seems, are routine for important events where nothing can be left to chance. And so, China apparently has no monopoly on faking it. Nevertheless, the situation in Beijing gave Ai Weiwei occasion to lament in [The Guardian](#) about how China may be able to fake its way to a perfect Olympics – to the "fake applause" of the media and the public – but "true happiness" can never be faked: "This nation is notorious for its ability to make or fake anything cheaply," he wrote. "'Made-in-China' goods now fill homes around the world. But our giant country has a small problem. We can't manufacture the happiness of our people." He added that, "Real public contentment can't be pirated or copied."

Maybe so. But accusing China of faking itself into modernity is as old as, well, modernity itself. In *River Town*, Peter Hessler recounts a scandalized 17th century Spanish priest named Domingo Navarrete who described business methods in China thus: "The Chinese are very ingenious at imitation. They have imitated to perfection whatsoever they have seen brought out of Europe. In the Province of Canton they have counterfeited several things so exactly, that they sell them Inland for Goods brought out from Europe." While there's nothing novel in remarking on the ubiquity of China's knock-off economy, it may be worth reflecting on just what is so important about shoring up the boundary between the real and the fake, especially when using the yardstick of modernity to measure China's emergence as a world power.

Accusing China of faking its way into modernity is equivalent to accusing China of doing exactly what the dream of modernity demands of its supplicants: a will to hide disorder with order, to keep at bay the ever-present chaos of the world with a reliable façade of predictableness, indeed an ability to hold out the threat of disorder as reason enough to demand that people willingly play their roles in maintaining harmony. The 'paradise' of order and harmony that modernity promises, like all utopias, cannot but be realized without dissolving the boundaries between the real and the fake, the sacred and profane, the original and the virtual.

So perhaps Ai Weiwei has it wrong. What if "true happiness" must *always* be complicit with fakery? What if something so lofty and pure as true happiness can never be realized except in some form of approximation or replication, where all the inevitable blemishes, mistakes, and unexpected turns of

events can be controlled, deleted and photo-shopped out? Judging from the comments posted on *The Guardian's* website, many of Ai's readers bristled at the implication that true happiness could only be found in a 'free and democratic' country like England. And that shouldn't be surprising. While the English are perhaps more enthusiastic than others at disowning happiness, the point is that true happiness is often something that is thought to be found faraway, in other places or in other times. And should we actually ever experience true happiness here and now, it is likely to dissipate before we've had time to realize what hit us. From this way of looking at things, Ai Weiwei is simply following in the footsteps of generations of utopian thinkers who have imagined a paradise of perfect happiness lying just beyond the horizon, just out of reach, and just about anywhere but *here and now*.

But for those of us who must live here in the present, we'll have to make do with photo-shopped fireworks and lip-synched songs. Still, China's current enthusiasm for fakery is disarming. In today's post-reform consumer economy of leisure culture, there is little that *isn't* faked. It's almost too banal to mention how true this is of basic consumer goods from DVDs and liquor to I-Phones and Rolexes. But that's just the beginning. China's cultural landscape is now dotted with fake Eiffel Towers, fake Capitol buildings and White Houses, and fake English villages. There are towns, like Zhouzhuang, that are even fakes of themselves. Like the 'scandal' of a fake Olympic ceremony, China's fake landscapes are nothing more than an homage to modernity's insatiable appetite for order, efficiency, and rationality, all in the name of achieving that inevitable repose of harmony and tranquility promised by modernity. It is a utopic order achieved by blending the real and the fake, by replication and mimicry.

Lewis Mumford once wrote that there are two kinds of utopias: one of escape and one of reconstruction. The latter should be easily recognized in the Socialist Realist art of the Mao era. In the Party's current version of this utopia, however, *order* is highly valued. In fact, however, it is difficult to find a vision of utopia that does not imagine a highly ordered society of peace, harmony, and tranquility. This seems as true of utopias of escape (e.g. Peach Blossom Spring, Shangri-la) as of utopias of reconstruction (e.g. New Harmony, Indiana). Orderliness is a virus of utopia that just won't go away.

China's current vision of a modern utopia similarly places a high value on order and harmony. If we are scandalized by the deliberate and repeated transgressions of the boundary between real and fake going on in China today, then we have only forgotten that the modern project has always yearned for the kind of order that can only be dreamed of and that has only ever trafficked in the arts of fakery.

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