

# **Mass Media and Representation: A Critical Comparison of the CCTV and NBC Presentations of the Opening Ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Summer Games**

by

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## **Abstract**

The CCTV and NBC broadcasts of the Opening Ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics offer profoundly different ideological projections of Chinese history, culture, and nation. In CCTV's rendition, China has reclaimed its rightful place in the world and rectified an imbalance in East-West relations, echoing a theme that underlies Beijing's ongoing soft power campaign. NBC's presentation projects anxiety, uncertainty, as well as guarded optimism about China's rise, reflecting ambivalence in how to handle the projection of Chinese soft power. The narratives also mirror debates about Sino-U.S. relations both in the U.S. and China. Both the CCTV and NBC narratives are incoherent as they depend on massive erasures of history and contemporary realities to make sense.

The world was reminded in August 2012 that Olympic opening ceremonies have become a showcase for the projection of narratives about a host nation's history, culture, and contemporary place in the world. A central question in the run-up to the Games was how the ceremony in London would compare with the extravaganza produced in Beijing four years before. Would the British be able to produce an event with even close to the same impact as the production in Beijing? How would the narratives of Britishness on offer compare to those produced during the Beijing ceremony? The focus, four years later, on the Beijing event offers an opportunity for a serious, retrospective scholarly inquiry into the production and meaning of the narratives of history, culture, and nation that emerged from the floor of the Olympic Stadium in the Chinese capital on the evening of August 8, 2008.

An evaluation of the Beijing Opening Ceremony is not as straightforward as it might seem. The projection of narratives from an Olympic opening ceremony is a complicated, multifaceted communicative event. For the worldwide audience watching on television or on computer screens, narratives of history, culture, and nation do not come unfiltered from the floor of an Olympic stadium. They are not pumped directly, in pristine form, into the people's minds. National broadcasters filter and interpret scenes being performed in the stadium and offer their own culturally, politically, and historically contingent narratives to home audiences.

This essay critically examines and compares narratives about China presented to the Chinese and U.S. audiences in the coverage of the Beijing Opening Ceremony. Specially, I will analyze narratives projected to the Chinese audience by China Central Television (CCTV) and to American viewers by NBC. Because CCTV and NBC each had sole broadcast rights for the Opening Ceremony in China and the United States respectively, focusing on these two presentations allows for a forensic examination of narratives that were presented to mass audiences in both countries.

I will argue that CCTV and NBC offered narratives that reflect China's vigorous and ongoing efforts to project soft power and U.S. ambivalence and uncertainty about how to react to the campaign. Each broadcast presented different ideological valences in pursuit of the same goal – namely, to fully integrate China into the global, capitalist order. The differences, however, reflect potentially deep ideological conflict. The CCTV narrative emphasized China's ascendance to equal status with the West, but the NBC broadcast projected anxiety, uncertainty, as well as guarded optimism about China's rise. The analysis will show that both sets of narratives were internally incoherent and depended on massive erasures of history and contemporary realities to make sense. Moreover, the ideological discourses that underlie the CCTV and NBC broadcasts reflect actual policy debates and positions in China and the United States.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Narratives of the kind CCTV projected are key building blocks of what Benedict Anderson calls the imagined community of nation and a key component of cultural identity.<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein points out that the construction of a people requires accounts of the past in a process that is inherently paradoxical. A people requires a firm sense that they have a fixed primordial past, but the past that is constructed is ever changing based on the needs of the present.<sup>2</sup> Critical theorist Homi Bhabha speaks of the “impossible unity” of nation stemming from an “ambivalence” that emerges from an awareness of the paradox of needing a fixed primordial past that necessarily changes with current cultural and social circumstances.<sup>3</sup> Anthropologist Ann Anagnost explains how narratives of nation must be constantly reconfigured to attempt to achieve this “impossible unity.” Stories must be remade to paint a picture of a natural, continuous and unproblematic flow from past to present. This requires an

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1 Benedict R. O’G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Editions and NLB, 1983).

2 Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London: Verso, 1991), 78.

3 Homi K. Bhabha, “Introduction: Narrating the Nation,” in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 1–7.

“enunciating subject” (such as the Chinese Communist Party) that speaks with the force of history and brings abstract conceptions (such as the very notion of a nation, people or oppressed class) into the political present. Anagnost calls this a “myth of presence.”<sup>4</sup> For Bhabha and Anagnost, narrative closure is always subject to ambiguity, tension, and the potential to be undermined.

Critical and postcolonial theory informs the analysis of the NBC presentation. Critical scholars of China work from three assumptions: that media constructions of the country help build a self-image of the U.S., that narratives about China are ever-shifting because of global change, and that the U.S. media discourse on China remains tied to history, politics and culture.<sup>5</sup> These scholars often employ critical discourse analyses of U.S. media texts and extract frames of analysis from them, such as narrative binaries that pit images of old China against those of new China, or accounts of the good China against the bad China.

Postcolonial scholarship provides a reference point and language to analyze Orientalism in media texts. Orientalism is the depicting of other cultures as objects of exotic, fetishized attention far removed from their lived realities. Edward Said's landmark 1979 book *Orientalism* argued that European colonial rulers in the “Orient” – by which he meant the Middle East and the Indian Subcontinent – constructed a history of the people they conquered and created a fetishized aura surrounding them. Europeans were able to subordinate the “other,” facilitate colonial rule, and solidify their own identity by projecting exotic and erotic fantasies onto the “other.”<sup>6</sup> Although China was never colonized in the way the Middle East and India were, the power dynamics with the West were similar, and scholars have successfully applied the concept of Orientalism to China.

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4 Ann Anagnost, *National Past-Times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 4–6.

5 Kent A. Ono and Joy Yang Jiao, “China in the US Imaginary: Tibet, the Olympics, and the 2008 Earthquake,” *Communication & Critical/Cultural Studies* 5, no. 4 (December 2008): 406–410.

6 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 1st ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

Other scholars theorize frameworks that offer deeper pathways to understand and explain change in a postcolonial context.<sup>7</sup> Bhabha describes mimicry as colonial desire for an “other” that is “almost the same but not quite.”<sup>8</sup> Difference must be maintained, but there is an ambivalence in the process that produces slippage. Representations of an “other” in this theoretical framework are tension filled, always subject to a dialectical push and pull, never able to rest in a fixed position.<sup>9</sup> The stereotype for Bhabha is one of the primary features of Orientalist, colonial discourse. Stereotypes are inherently unstable and must be nervously repeated lest they lose their potency.<sup>10</sup> Arif Dirlik argues that Asians and Chinese in particular have engaged in a kind of self-Orientalism, consciously or unconsciously producing representations that play to Orientalist conceptions in the West.<sup>11</sup>

Xiaomei Chen takes the conversation another step forward, arguing that China has employed “Occidentalism” as a discursive practice to absorb and make use of Western Orientalism. Chen asserts that Occidentalism “has allowed the Orient to participate actively and with indigenous creativity in the process of self-appropriation, even after being appropriated and constructed by Western others.”<sup>12</sup> Occidentalism includes the practice of officially deciding to consciously play to the West's Orientalist expectations. This is a cultural and political negotiation in which one side (China) appears to give the other side (the West) what it wants, through an elaborate cultural shadow dance. Occidentalism explains how China can adopt and adapt Western technology and declare, somewhat nervously, that the

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7 Arthur Kleinman and Tsung-Yi Lin, eds., *Normal and Abnormal Behavior in Chinese Culture* (Dordrecht & Boston: Springer, 1981); Karen J Leong, *The China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong, and the Transformation of American Orientalism* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2005); Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

8 Homi K. Bhabha, “The Other Question,” in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 122.

9 Ibid., 94–131.

10 Ibid., 94–120.

11 Arif Dirlik, “Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism,” *History and Theory* 35, no. 4 (December 1996): 104.

12 Xiaomei Chen, *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China*, 2nd ed., rev. and expanded. (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 2.

result is proudly and uniquely Chinese. The interplay of Occidentalism and Orientalism provides a framework for understanding the ambivalence that is always close to the surface as NBC presents China as an exotic, other culture that is “almost the same but not quite.”

### **Methodology**

The essay uses discourse, textual, and semiotic analysis to unpack salient narratives emerging from the CCTV and NBC broadcasts, analyze the issues they address, and discuss the narrative devices employed in that effort. The commentary, as recorded on a DVD offered for sale by the International Olympic Committee, was closely and repeatedly viewed and transcripts in Chinese and English developed and read. Emerging themes were critically analyzed. a detailed, complete transcript of both broadcasts was produced, using commercially available DVD recordings of each broadcast.<sup>13</sup> For the CCTV broadcast, a transcription in Chinese was rendered into English.<sup>14</sup>

The critical analysis and comparison proceeds through a number of steps. First comes a discussion of how CCTV erases director Zhang Yimou as the author of the ceremony while NBC insists on emphasizing his role. A discussion follows of important themes emerging from the broadcasts: 1) The overall view of China, 2) Peace and the Olympic dream, 3) A “green” Olympics, 4) Nation, party and nationalism, 5) History and culture, 6) Confucius and harmony, and 7) Construction of the people.

### **The Ceremony in Brief**

The Opening Ceremony was a singular event, a four-hour, self-conscious presentation of China, its history, culture, place in the world, and future prospects produced under the direction of the noted Chinese director Zhang Yimou at the behest of the Chinese state and Chinese Communist Party. The ceremony took place on August 8, 2008 inside Beijing's Bird's Nest stadium constructed for the Games.

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13 CCTV, *The Opening Ceremony of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games*, 2 vols. (Beijing, 2008); NBC *Beijing 2008 Complete Opening Ceremony*, DVD, 2 vols. (Beijing, 2008).

14 The translation and transcriptions are my own, but I was assisted by my wife, who is a native Chinese speaker and professional interpreter and teacher of the Chinese (Mandarin) language. I have been a student of the Chinese language for more than 30 years and did my own interviews in Chinese and my own reading in Chinese when I was a Beijing-based correspondent for *The Asian Wall Street Journal* from 1986 to 1988.

It consisted of a series of performance vignettes that, taken as a whole, displayed a sense of Chinese-ness. The ceremony featured a cast of thousands, meticulous choreography, elaborate displays of pyrotechniques (some of which turned out to be computer generated) and giant video screens, one of which appeared to unfurl on the stadium floor like a Chinese scrollwork of old and another that wrapped around the upper reaches of the stadium above the grandstands. It was seen in person by more than 90,000 people, by official count, and was beamed to mass television audiences in China and around the world.<sup>15</sup>

The program was divided into sections, starting with historical scenes and transitioning to contemporary vignettes. The ceremony began with a countdown by 2,008 male drummers who beat on replicas of ancient *fou* drums. Scenes that followed illustrated Chinese ink brush painting, Confucian scholars, the evolution of the Chinese written language, the invention of moveable type and the compass, the splendor of the Tang dynasty and the silk road, China's ancient sea voyages of discovery, and Chinese traditional music and opera. The modern portion of the performance opened with famed pianist Lang Lang playing a contemporary piece with a five-year-old girl that segued into a scene featuring hundreds of green-clad "messengers" outfitted with points of light all over their bodies. They formed and re-formed, first into stars, then into a "peace" pigeon and following that into a replica of the Bird's Nest itself. Also in this section was a modernist performance of the Chinese martial art *taijiquan*, a scene in which school children used crayon-like instruments to make a painting, and a vignette showing Chinese taikonauts<sup>16</sup> floating around a rising blue planet. One top of the planet were Chinese pop singer Liu Huan and English star Sarah Brightman, who performed a duet of the event's theme song, "You and Me," while umbrella like posters with pictures of smiling children from all over the world were displayed by 2,008 children on the floor of the stadium. Dancers and singers welcomed the

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15 Michael Bristow, "Spectators Awed as Games Begin," News, *BBC News*, August 8, 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7550283.stm>.

16 Taikonaut is an English-language word derived by combining the beginning part of the Chinese term for space traveler (the *tai* in *taikong ren*, or literally space person) and the last part of the American word astronaut.

athletes, who made a triumphal appearance, team by team. Following Olympic tradition, the Chinese athletes were the last to enter the stadium. In a highly emotional moment, the Olympic Torch appeared in the hands of a Torch bearer. A succession of runners, all former Chinese Olympians, made the last series of jaunts with the Torch until Li Ning, China's most celebrated Olympic gold medalist, took it on its final laps, eventually lighting the Olympic Flame high above the stadium in a finale that had all the earmarks of a high-tech acrobatic act.

CCTV and NBC offered presentations of the Opening Ceremony that were far different not just in ideological content but in style. For the Chinese network, presenters Sun Zhengping, a man, and Zhou Tao, a woman, provided the commentary. They did not introduce themselves and were never seen on camera. (Their names were obtained only by consulting Chinese blogs.)<sup>17</sup> Only their voices were heard during the coverage of the ceremony. They alternated with almost mathematical precision, each speaking for a few minutes before allowing the other to take over. Their commentary was highly descriptive but also used flowery and metaphorical language as they talked about the splendors at hand and interpreted the significance of the unfolding scenes. The mood was festive throughout, with the commentators periodically raising their voices at emotional high points. At various times, the commentators remained silent, allowing scenes to play out without benefit of interpretation.

NBC's commentary by contrast had a much more conversational, informal tone. It featured two of the network's most prominent personalities, sports anchor Bob Costas and Matt Lauer, co-host of NBC's *Today* show. Along with them was a new face, expert analyst Joshua Cooper Ramo, who was introduced as a former foreign editor of TIME Magazine. Ramo's pro-business credentials were not fully disclosed. In introducing him, NBC did not mention that Ramo was a managing director and partner in the Beijing office of Kissinger Associates, the consulting firm started by Henry Kissinger

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17 “终极完整版]第29届北京奥运会开幕式解说词·上\_暗香浮动\_百度空间,” Baidu.com, *Complete Transcript of the Opening Ceremony of the 29th Olympiad in Beijing, Part I*, [http://hi.baidu.com/lang\\_ct/blog/item/254b3dfa73b0b5d8b58f3122.html](http://hi.baidu.com/lang_ct/blog/item/254b3dfa73b0b5d8b58f3122.html).

that specializes in facilitating business deals for foreign companies in China.<sup>18</sup> Predictably considering his connection to Kissinger Associates, Ramo's commentary left a strong impression that China was very much open for business and that the ground for money making was extremely fertile.

### **Erasing the Author**

For CCTV, erasing any sense of individual authorship of the ceremony was a key narrative strategy that served the purpose of placing the Communist Party front and center. While much attention in the Western and Chinese media before, during, and after the Olympics focused on Zhang Yimou, the famed film director who put together the Opening Ceremony under the watchful eye of the Communist Party leadership, CCTV never once mentioned Zhang nor made reference to who or what was responsible for creating and designing the Opening Ceremony.<sup>19</sup> There was no discussion of how the performers were recruited, organized and trained.

This erasure of authorship has profound ideological implications. CCTV is not presenting itself as the interpretive arm of some individual's vision. Rather, the CCTV commentators treat the ceremony as an event that is simply there to be understood on its own terms as it unfolds. The role of the commentator is to assist in that effort. A novel or a film has an author, a story, and characters who motivate the plot. Interpretative energy can be spent thinking about whether and to what degree the author informs the narrative voices in the story. Questions about authorial intent arise. With any sense of individual authorship stripped from view in CCTV's presentation, such questions are suppressed.

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18 Huffington Post, "Joshua Cooper Ramo: Who Is NBC's China Analyst During The Olympics?," August 11, 2008, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/08/11/joshua-cooper-ramo-who-is\\_n\\_118225.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/08/11/joshua-cooper-ramo-who-is_n_118225.html); Ken Silverstein, "NBC's Olympics, Brought to You By Henry Kissinger," *Harper's Magazine*, August 9, 2008, <http://www.harpers.org/archive/2008/08/hbc-90003378>.

19 Yifan Zhu, "Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony Director Praises Team Performance," *Xinhua News Agency* (Beijing, August 9, 2008), <http://english.people.com.cn/90002/94411/95057/6471839.html>; Jim Yardley, "In Grand Olympic Show, Some Sleight of Voice," *The New York Times* (Beijing, August 13, 2008); Jing Zhang, "'Proud to Be Chinese'," *The New York Times*, August 9, 2008, sec. Sports / Olympics, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/09/sports/olympics/09ceremony.html?scp=18&sq=beijing+olympics+opening&st=nyt>; "What China Displays To World in Olympics," *People's Daily Online* (Beijing, August 11, 2008); Xia Chen, "Zhang Yimou Reveals Olympic Opening Ceremony Secrets," *China.org.cn*, November 1, 2007, [http://www.china.org.cn/entertainment/2007-11/01/content\\_1230436.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/entertainment/2007-11/01/content_1230436.htm).

The story does not spring from the head of a creative individual or group of artists. Rather, on offer is a pure rendition of the unfolding timeline of Chinese history and culture, an authoritative narrative by virtue of the fact that it appears to just be there, in the same sense that filmmakers can use techniques that make an omniscient narrator seemingly invisible.<sup>20</sup> Despite the mass display of humanity in the stadium, the show seemingly is created without the benefit of human authorial intervention. The erasure of authorship equips CCTV with the rhetorical armor to display its own interpretation, unchallenged by any notion that another authority might have had other ideas. The only matter to speculate on is who CCTV speaks for, and that is no matter for speculation at all. The Chinese audience knows the network speaks for the Communist Party. The link between CCTV's narration and the Chinese Communist Party is direct, making the Party, in Anagnost's terms, the enunciating subject of CCTV's narrative.

Setting up the Chinese Communist Party as the enunciating subject of the CCTV commentary is accomplished in unmistakable ways. Even before the ceremony gets under way, CCTV's viewers are shown a close-up shot of Communist Party Chairman and President Hu Jintao walking to his seat in the stadium with International Olympic Committee President Jacques Rogge. The commentators make no mention of Rogge but instead declare that state leader Hu Jintao has entered the stadium. Other state leaders are named one by one until a list of fifteen has been enumerated. Only then is Rogge's name announced. At crucial times during the ceremony, Hu and other state leaders are shown intently watching the unfolding drama. Shots of George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin looking awkward or bewildered only serve to emphasize by comparison the dignity and control of China's leaders. The clear

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20 David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). For a detailed account of narration in Hollywood films, see Chapter Three: Classical Narration, 24–41.

message is that the Party is *the* force enabling the seamless transition from past to present to future and propelling China to greatness. As if to emphasize the importance of the national leaders, the CCTV commentators do not mention any of the performers in the ceremony – even the soloists – by name.

CCTV's use of visual imagery during the raising of the Chinese flag on the stadium floor further fuses nation and Party. At the beginning of the scene, viewers are shown the national flag at the bottom of the flag pole. As soon as the band begins to play the national anthem, the camera shifts to Hu Jintao as he sings along. Next, his predecessor as President and Party Chairman, Jiang Zemin, is shown singing. Shots of other leaders follow in succession. The flag is not seen again until it is atop the flagpole. From flag to leaders and back to flag again, the visuals leave no doubt that Party and nation are one. In Anagnost's terms, the Party is the subject that creates the nation as a myth of presence.

If CCTV erases any trace of Zhang as the creator of the Opening Ceremony, NBC goes out of its way to give full responsibility to the famed film director. The NBC commentators repeatedly attempt to explain not only what Zhang is trying to say but how he is trying to say it. In the moments before the event gets under way, Costas says flatly that the ceremony is “in the hands of Zhang Yimou, who is the most esteemed film director in China.” He follows this sentence, which effectively hands Zhang responsibility for the ceremony, by saying, “We're about to see what happens when an artist gets almost unlimited resources. It's almost a cinematic presentation playing out in real time.” Not only is Zhang in charge, but the Chinese state has handed him a blank check and unfettered creative authority.

There is no discussion about how a film director might have been able to obtain almost unlimited resources with no strings attached. Instead, the NBC commentators come back repeatedly to the cinema metaphor as the ceremony proceeds. As one of the characters for “harmony” appears on the floor of the stadium, Lauer says, “This is Zhang Yimou creating a cinematic blockbuster in real time on the floor of the stadium.” In a vignette that features Confucian scholars carrying bamboo scrolls, Costas tells the audience that Zhang Yimou refers to the scene as “Confucian travels.” When the Great Wall

comes down and gets replaced by plum flowers, it is Zhang Yimou who is doing it, in NBC's telling. Ramo reinforces the idea a few moments later, calling Zhang “a master of visual symbolism.” NBC even suggests that Zhang had the power to custom order the stadium itself. Lauer at one point notes that an LED video screen wraps entirely around the top of the stadium, adding that “this really leads us to believe that Zhang Yimou came up with an artistic dream and then said to the people here, now build me a stadium that can accommodate it. It's a stunning image.” In none of these comments about Zhang is there any discussion of a possible role of the Communist Party in deciding just what could and could not be included in the ceremony.

Beyond erasing the Chinese Communist Party as an author, co-author, or even final arbiter of content, the placing of Zhang Yimou front and center offers NBC a road map to credibility. If the network's commentators are simply reflecting what Zhang is trying to project, the only question that can be asked is whether NBC is doing that job accurately. The network's lineup of highly credible presenters provides a ready answer.

The erasure of Zhang Yimou by CCTV and the hyper-emphasis on his authorship by NBC highlights a key ideological difference in the presentations. CCTV is ignoring Zhang to emphasize not only the role of the Communist Party but the ideological importance of collectivism. NBC on the other hand is stressing Chinese individualism, a trait that could make China seem “almost the same but not quite” to an American audience. Both moves are accomplished only through massive erasures of reality. CCTV is ignoring the obvious fact that the Communist Party selected Zhang to organize the event. NBC neglects the obvious fact that Zhang was working at the behest of the Party's top leaders.

### **Overall Views of China**

CCTV offers an expansive and celebratory view of China as a whole, one conducive to the soft power campaign goal of projecting the image of a nation that is playing a progressive and constructive role on the world stage. The nation's 100-year struggle to host the Olympics finally succeeds. The

achievement corresponds to the end of China's 100 years of humiliation at the hands of the Western powers and marks the end of the historic dominance of Western civilization. As the famed Chinese Olympic gold medalist Li Ning lights the Olympic Flame high above the stadium, commentator Zhou Tao says, "Western civilization, which was born in ancient Greece, and Eastern civilization, which has been passed down for 5,000 years, is finally, at this moment, coming together." The glow from the Olympic Flame rises as does China. The Olympic ideal, symbolized by the Flame, hails a fundamental equality and common humanity of the peoples and nations of the world, and China's rise signals a leveling of power between Eastern and Western civilization. The new world order will be based on openness and reciprocal trade relations, enabling China to thrive in a world of capitalistic globalization.

CCTV's new world order also features a role reversal of the Western fantasy that makes the Oriental woman the object of male desire. The broadcast focuses much attention on Chinese pop singer Liu Huan and English star Sarah Brightman as they hold hands while singing the Olympic theme song "You and Me" from their perch atop a blue globe that has risen from beneath the stadium floor. CCTV offers no commentary during the song but lingers on the close-up shot, allowing the visual imagery to do the talking. The female object of attention is Occidental, and the Western woman is holding hands with a Chinese man. As far as the symbolic object of male desire is concerned, the playing field has not been leveled; it has been upended and inverted, tipped in favor of the East.

NBC's text presents China's full integration with the wider capitalist world as a desirable, necessary goal but, unlike the CCTV version, one that is far from a finished project. This is not the moment of East-West equality and full redemption for China that CCTV proclaims, a message that comes through in the commentary and the visual imagery. NBC, for example, shows the close shot of the two singers holding hands for only about three seconds, spending the rest of the time while the song is sung switching between wide shots of the hundreds of performers on the floor and a slideshow of

children's pictures that is appearing on the video screen that wraps around the top of the stadium. In symbolic terms, CCTV's move to turn Orientalism on its head is downplayed for the American audience.

If NBC does not assign China equal status with the West, it does highlight hopeful signs. NBC's Ramo offers the notion that China is changing in ways that are palatable to the Western project, but he makes it clear that much more in unspecified reform is needed. The Olympic moment marks a time when China can be seen in a new light, when the Chinese people want to replace former images of themselves and paint new ones on a blank slate. There is a sense that a historic turning point may be at hand. As Ramo offers his analysis, black-clad dancers appear on a blank LED screen on the floor of the stadium and begin producing a modern version of a traditional Chinese "mountain-water" (*san shui*) scrollwork by "painting" with their gloved hands. Ramo says:

We begin here with something highly symbolic: a blank sheet of paper expressing the wish of the Chinese for people around the world as they look at this country over the next 17 days to fill the blank sheet of paper with new images, and maybe to replace images that the Chinese themselves in many cases are eager to leave behind.

Ramo does not say what images the Chinese want to leave behind, but the implication seems clear enough. In the context of an NBC narrative that glorifies the Chinese tradition, the historical reference point in this case extends into the recent past, implying that the Chinese themselves desire a clean break from their Communist history.

CCTV makes a similar point but with a darker valence. Over aerial shots that show fireworks and connect the Bird's Nest stadium with Beijing's main avenues and Tiananmen Square, commentator Zhou notes that the stadium, the new Olympic park and the stately, solemn Tiananmen Square are now happy partners. Commentator Sun follows up by saying the aerial trip linking the three locations also fuses the city's "yesterday and today." The commentary carries heavy ideological weight for a regime that has worked assiduously to erase from public memory the bloody 1989 Tiananmen crackdown in

which unarmed demonstrators were gunned down by Chinese troops.<sup>21</sup> The Square is solemn and stately, not the scene of violence and a metaphor for China's old guard killing its young. The city's "yesterday" does not include what is officially regarded as a counter-revolutionary movement that had to be crushed to save Chinese "socialism."

For NBC, what is important for China today is to wipe away negatives of the Communist past. The open-ended nature of this signification allows for a profusion of signifieds. Depending on one's point of view, a negative needing correction could be the country's human rights record, the authoritarian, non-democratic political system, the treatment of Tibet, unfair trade practices, currency manipulation, or any other image or practice that from a dominant American view is preventing China from gaining full acceptance within the Western capitalist orbit. Ramo's rhetoric also opens up a moral question. Is he talking about simply sweeping ugly images of past transgressions – such as the Tiananmen crackdown – under the historical rug as the Communist Party has attempted to do, or must some reckoning with the past accompany these different images? Is NBC ideologically aiding the Party in erasing public memory of the ugly past, or is it suggesting a course that could lead anywhere from a national apology to reforms that seek to change the basic structure of the regime? These questions are deferred in the interest of avoiding unnecessary antagonism and furthering the capitalist project in China. An apparently ideological alignment between CCTV and NBC on the need for China to fully engage in the world capitalistic system on closer scrutiny reveals differences and ambiguities in how that goal is to be accomplished.

### **Peace and the Olympic Dream**

A major theme in the CCTV presentation is the tethering of China's Olympic dream to a wish for peace and reconciliation with the rest of the world, another vital element in the soft power campaign.

Commentator Zhou tells the audience early in the broadcast that the Olympics symbolize human

<sup>21</sup> Anthony Thomas, "PBS Frontline," *The Tank Man*, April 11, 2006, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tankman/view/>.

solidarity, friendship, and peace. A little later commentator Sun declares that the Olympic Rings, which at this point are rising above the stadium floor, stir the emotions of everyone who loves “peace, friendship, and the Olympic movement.” At another high point of the ceremony – when a representation of the Great Wall dramatically falls and plum flowers appear on top of it – commentator Zhou says the scene expresses “the fervent wish for peace of the Chinese people.” When performers on the stadium floor maneuver themselves into the shape of a pigeon, Zhou declares that the scene symbolizes peace, friendship, and purity. The underlying message is that a rising China is contributing to the well-being of the world in the spirit of the Olympics and is not a threat – military, political, economic or any other kind. China should be allowed and even encouraged on its present development path because the rest of the world will reap benefits.

CCTV's narrative of a non-threatening, peace-loving China is an extension of a theme that had been established prior to the Games by the official Chinese media, and it also depends on erasing any hint of the controversies that were widely reported in the American media prior to the Opening Ceremony. China's human rights record, the treatment of Tibet and other indications of China's authoritarian system, demonstrations that occurred along the Olympic Torch route, and general concern about China's emerging role in the world were all prominent subjects of reportage and commentary in the U.S. None of these topics is referenced directly in the CCTV commentary. In pre-Olympics reporting, the official Chinese media blunted criticism in some cases by criticizing the critics – calling people who disrupted the Torch run in Paris pro-Tibetan extremists, for example – or by putting a favorable gloss on an event. The arrival of the Olympic Torch in Beijing, for example, marked a “journey of harmony.”<sup>22</sup> For CCTV, it is all gloss and no rebuttal.

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22 Xinhua News Agency, “Olympic Torch Ends Journey Before Opening Ceremony,” August 8, 2008, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/olympics/torch/2008-08/08/content\\_6917575.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/olympics/torch/2008-08/08/content_6917575.htm).

For CCTV the emphasis on friendliness and warmth suggests a double-edged ideological meaning. China must maintain friendships with the peoples of the world to achieve its goals, but the repeated emphasis on this theme could indicate concern by the leadership that China is perceived as insufficiently friendly and peaceful, that the outside world is not so sure of the country's motivations. To prevail in its soft power goals, China must counter the notion that its intentions are anything but peaceful or that it is seeking economic domination and singular superpower status.

The NBC commentary by contrast deals with the question of a rising China and its intentions but in a decidedly ambivalent manner that takes the fine point of critique evident in the U.S. media reporting of China in advance of the Games and rounds it into a blur in which questions of right and wrong are obscured. Lauer early in the ceremony tells the audience that President Bush had issued a tough statement in Thailand about human rights in China, as he was en route to China for the Opening Ceremony. But he quickly adds that China's rising power dictates that nations around the world deal with China in a nuanced way, agreeing on some things and disagreeing on others. His message is that there is no sense in characterizing China as a pariah state because of its authoritarian, non-democratic tendencies. As an information network, NBC is fulfilling its obligation to deal with salient, real issues in coverage of a ceremony that in part showcases the China of the past, present, and future. As an entertainment network, NBC is staying true to its mission of offering an engaging presentation of an event that also is an eye-grabbing high-tech fantasy show.

The theme of peace, so heavily emphasized in the CCTV presentation, is absent in the NBC narrative. The scene with the peace pigeon passes without comment from any of the NBC presenters. There is no mention by the network's commentators that the pigeon represents China's desire for peace and friendship in its dealings with the outside world, that the Chinese people exhibit a friendly and welcoming spirit, or that China stands for world peace.

In ideological terms, CCTV's depiction of China as a friendly, peace-loving nation adds a dimension to the overall view of China. The nation has not only rectified a historical imbalance and achieved an equal footing with the West; it also is offering values that the world longs for: peace, friendship, and hospitality befitting a nation that adheres to Olympic values. These open-minded values, buttressed by a deep sense of fair play, are driving contemporary China, which should be embraced and not feared. NBC, on the other hand, offers a mixed reception at best, reflecting a more general ambivalence about China in the United States. If China can rise in a way that is acceptable to the West, the nation can be applauded. But there is uncertainty, and, at least for now, China must be carefully handled.

### **Green Olympics**

The CCTV commentary emphasizes that China is offering the world an environmentally progressive Olympics as part of its friendly, peace loving, and cooperative role in the world. Early in the ceremony, commentator Sun mentions that China promised the International Olympic Committee a “green” Olympics. A short time later commentator Zhou emphasizes the “green” nature of the new Olympic Park in Beijing. But an extended discussion of the green theme comes further along in the ceremony, during a vignette that demonstrates the Chinese martial art *taijiquan*, which involves exaggeratedly slow movements of the arms, legs, and head. As the *taiji* performers transition between routines by forming concentric circles and running, with those in each circle going in opposite directions, they encircle a group of school children who have just finished doing a painting with giant crayons. Commentator Sun explains the importance of the circle in Chinese culture, saying it expresses the idea that the universe and the emotional lives of people are intimately linked. Commentator Zhou then provides the ideological meaning of the scene and offers instructions to the audience. The children, she says “are planting green hopes with their innocent minds. Let's work together to carry out the promise to hand the world a green Olympics.” When flocks of green birds appear on the wrap-

around video screen above the stadium, commentator Sun points out that both the *taijiquan* performers and the children seem to be drawn by an unseen power. The birds “are telling us this is their green home and they are sentimentally attached to it,” he says.

The message at the close of the *taijiquan* scene is that the future must be green. Otherwise, the Chinese nation will disappoint its next generation. Even the birds are mesmerizing everyone – adults and children – with a rapturous projection of the message. It is not something that can be passively received. With all the force of the Chinese party-state, CCTV is telling the audience to participate in the effort. A green Olympics, and by extension, sustainable development into the future, is something that China must “hand the world.” The narrative depends on erasing anything that might depict China as a major polluter.

NBC ignores the direct claim that China is putting on a green Olympics and moves attention away from the specific problems of pollution in Beijing and in China generally, deflecting a theme that had been circulating widely in the U.S. media.<sup>23</sup> Ramo interprets the concentric circle scene as offering a universal, and not just a Chinese, message about environmental protection. “This is Zhang Yimou pointing at the many problems we face, not only China, but the world – the problems of global warming, the problems of resource depletion, and the burden of that (sic) places on the next generation which is going to have to solve them,” he says. Against a backdrop of U.S. journalists reporting on the specific and widespread problems of environmental degradation in China, NBC's commentary indicates

that pollution is not exclusively or even primarily a Chinese problem. The ideological effect is to take

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23 Xinhua News Agency, “IOC Chief Praises China’s Anti-pollution Efforts”, August 7, 2008, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-08/07/content\\_9031427.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-08/07/content_9031427.htm); Jim Yardley, “In Beijing, Blue Skies Prove Hard To Achieve,” *The New York Times* (Beijing, July 29, 2008), <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/29/sports/olympics/29china.html?scp=1&sq=yardley%20beijing%20blue%20skies&st=cse>.

the focus off China and the environmental problems of its own making and suggest that creating a sustainable world can be done only through the cooperation of the global community of nations.

NBC at the same time offers no support for the notion that Beijing is hosting a “green” Olympics. The ideological effect is to weave a careful, ambivalent line, avoiding expressions that could be interpreted as siding with the official Chinese claims of environmental progress and at the same time sidestepping widely circulating criticism of China for contributing massively to the world's environmental degradation. Sustainability, like the establishment of a harmonious society, is a hope, an ideal, as Ramo makes clear when he says about the concentric circle scene:

And I'll tell you, to a Western audience looking at a bunch of guys basically doing karate around a group of school children may be kind of confusing. But the message here is very clear. The harmony of the *taiji* master, the belief in harmony between man and nature is really the only hope for the kind of sustainable development for China and for other nations over the next few years.

Ramo's commentary leaves hope for harmony between man and nature as a vague, idealistic sentiment befitting of an Olympic opening ceremony that is part phantasmagoria. And the message comes with an Orientalized meshing of national cultures. Karate is a Japanese cultural practice.<sup>24</sup> Ramo evidently is attempting to make a cute, down-home, American type of analogy based on the notion that the audience would be familiar with karate and not with *taijiquan*. The two are linked only because they are performed by people who have similar visual characteristics in Western eyes. But the performers are not “basically doing karate.” Karate is karate and *taijiquan* is *taijiquan*. They are arguably more different than American football is from the Canadian version of the game, a distinction that would never be lost on North American sports fans.

The commentaries on the green theme offer divergent ideological valences. For CCTV, the

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<sup>24</sup> Gichin Funakoshi, *Karate-Do Kyo-han; The Master Text: 空手道教範* (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1973).

promise of an environmentally friendly Olympics is another element in China's role of enhanced responsibility and openness in the world. The association with children signals that the green consciousness is not fleeting. It is recognized as necessary to nurture the next generation, so much so that even the birds, which link symbolically to the peace pigeon, are paying attention. For NBC, ambivalence once again is the watchword. In the wake of U.S. media reporting on the ugly pollution problems in China, NBC, as an information network, cannot endorse the notion that China is presenting a green Olympics. NBC likewise could not be expected to detract from the entertainment value of the broadcast or overtly criticize the host nation by pointing fingers at China for environmental degradation. The result is the making of pollution and other environmental problems as a universal, not just a Chinese, issue. On the one hand, NBC is rejecting the CCTV view of China as an environmental champion. On the other hand, NBC is sheltering China from the kind of criticism that had circulated widely in U.S. journalistic discourse.

### **Nation, Party, and Nationalism**

The presentation of nationalism and the relationship between the Communist Party and Chinese state is another major theme that emerges from each commentary, and, once again, a surface ideological congruity between the CCTV and NBC texts becomes more tenuous, nervous, and unstable as the ceremony unfolds. Both networks suggest that China has made great strides in addressing profound historical problems, and both in their own ways attempt to soften the strident nationalism that threatens to erupt in this portion of the ceremony. But as a comparative analysis shows, stark divisions underlie the texts. A future that seems unbounded to CCTV by virtue of the leadership of the Party is ripe with challenges for NBC, which minimizes the role of the Party.

These complicated dynamics become evident in the handing of the moment of highest patriotism

in the ceremony. In this scene, children dressed in the costumes of China's fifty-six officially recognized national minorities carry the Chinese national flag into the stadium while a girl who expresses the picture of childhood beauty is seen singing the patriotic ballad "Ode to the Motherland." (It is not revealed until days later that she is lip synching.) The children hand the flag to a squad of impeccably dressed soldiers, who goose-step their way to the flag pole and raise the banner while the national anthem plays.

CCTV opts for a mostly visual approach, showcasing the singing of "Ode to the Motherland" as the children carry the flag and allowing the audience to hear the lyrics virtually without interruption. The words also crawl across the lower part of the screen. The song emphasizes themes of victory, steel-like strength, and riches gained from a beloved land.

The Chinese five-star Red Flag is waving in the wind  
The song of victory resounds loudly  
Singing our beloved country  
From now on going toward prosperity, riches, and strength  
Able to conquer high mountains and plains  
Stepping over the fast running Yellow River and Yangtze River  
The beautiful, wide open land  
We love peace  
We love our homeland  
Our solidarity, mutual love and durable strength is like steel

CCTV's viewers see shots that cut between the unfolding developments on the floor of the stadium, the rising of the Olympic Rings over the stadium, and Communist Party leadership watching the performance and singing along with the national anthem. The effect is to cement the idea that the Party is synonymous with the nation. The Party is responsible for the glorious fulfillment of China's Olympic dream and the rebalancing of East-West cultural, and by implication, political power.

NBC's Ramo offers an explanation of the handing of the flag to the soldiers by the children that

also attributes great achievements to the Chinese state while ignoring its non-democratic character and any unsettling signification that the goose-stepping soldiers might be producing among the audience.

I think it's a profound statement that will resonate in the hearts of the more than a billion Chinese people watching this tonight, the idea that the state is the guarantor of the future of those children, in a country that for so long could not guarantee the safety or the stability of the society for generations of children.

Implicit in the commentary is the idea that pre-reform (read Maoist) China could not guarantee the future for its citizens. Maoism was a failure, but reform instituted in the post-Mao Zedong era has launched China on a path to prosperity. The state is emphasized in Ramo's commentary, and the Party is not mentioned. Visual imagery, however, semiotically links the Party with the state and the people. NBC shows two short shots of President Hu Jintao, who also serves as Party Secretary-General, singing along with the national anthem during the flag-raising scene. The connection is made, albeit in a more subtle, less obvious way than in the CCTV presentation. There is an element of cultural relativism and Orientalism embedded in Ramo's remarks as well. It is acceptable for the state to be the guarantor of the children in China, a notion that would meet with stern resistance from many quarters in the United States. Ramo also is exercising Orientalism by speaking for the other. He professes to know exactly what will resonate in the hearts of more than a billion Chinese people.

NBC neither translates nor describes the lyrics of "Ode to the Motherland," but commentator Costas softens the idea that Chinese patriotism could turn in a xenophobic direction by transmuting patriotism into pride. The word patriotism does not appear in his commentary. As "Ode to the Motherland" is being sung in the background, Costas links pride to the sale of Chinese flags.

It's hard to overstate the universal sense of pride, any other differences aside, among the billion plus Chinese. In the days leading up to this opening ceremony, sales of Chinese flags went up some 30 times over.

The emphasis on "universal" and "pride" removes any hint that this kind of patriotism could have an

aggressive intent. Who in an American audience accustomed to waving the Stars and Stripes on the fourth of July could argue that expressions of pride in the form of sales of flags are anything but positive signs?

CCTV also tempers the overtly nationalistic sentiment of “Ode to the Motherland,” not at the moment of its singing but elsewhere in the presentation. To be sure, the commentators make it clear that China is indeed headed toward prosperity, riches, and strength. Its people are united in love of country. But CCTV takes its commentary in a direction that NBC does not by blunting talk of victory and conquering with narratives that speak about the inherent warmth, openness, friendship, and great imagination of the Chinese people. China is hospitable and welcoming to outsiders. An Olympic Beijing is a smiling Beijing. Smiles are a bridge between universal humanity and cultural particularity. As commentator Zhou says during the singing of the Olympic theme song “You and Me:”

No matter the skin color, no matter the race, no matter the nationality, no matter the language, the smile is our best expression. A smile can prompt us to have kindly and friendly feelings for each other.

CCTV's emphasis on a peace-loving, peace-seeking China serves to further downplay of any sense of aggressive nationalism.

The figure of the smiling child plays prominently in the muting of nationalism in the CCTV presentation at other times in the ceremony. As “You and Me” is being sung, 2008 children gather on the floor of the stadium holding umbrellas with pictures of smiling children from around the world. A variety of races and creeds is on display. At the same time, pictures of the children appear on the LED video screen that wraps around the top of the stadium. For CCTV, smiles express a core element in the essential Chinese nature and provide a link between Chinese particularity and universal human nature. Commentator Zhou, in the only disclosure during the broadcast of an aspect of how the ceremony was put together, says the Beijing Olympic Committee spent a full year gathering the photos. Children also

are linked to China's hopes for the future and the modernist notion that what will unfold is limited only by the imagination – in other words, not limited at all.

Smiles in the NBC narratives are signifiers not of an essential Chinese characteristic but of a cosmetic fix for potential problems. In the opening drum scene, Lauer notes that the performers were told to smile more to take the edge off an otherwise fierce demeanor. The commentators then exchange nervous laughter as an indication that the effort did not exactly remove the potentially frightening image of a mass of organized Chinese humanity moving in lock-step toward the same goal. The point is clearly a major one for NBC. Even before the scene unfolds, Lauer tells the audience that he and his colleagues would have more to say about the drummers demeanor later. The message to viewers is: you risk missing something important if you do not stay tuned.

The linking of children and the friendly, peaceful nature of the Chinese national character is likewise absent in the NBC narratives. Children who hand the flag to the soldiers are signifiers of a China that seems to be moving in the right direction, but commentary later in the ceremony emphasizes the many hurdles and challenges ahead. Ramo declares that reform – code for further integration into the world capitalist system that might include lower trade barriers, a freer currency, more openness to financial services, and a more pluralistic political system – only gets more difficult from here. The falling of the Great Wall and the emergence of the plum flowers in NBC's narrative is not overtly identified as an indicator of peaceful intentions; rather, the network offers a cultural and political spin. Costas interprets the scene as a reconciling of opposites, and Ramo adds that it is “again, a desire to replace one image of China with another one.” The images in question are implied and not directly enunciated, but the message again is clear. The Chinese themselves want to replace the old vestiges of insular Communism and move toward a kind of capitalism favorable to the Western project. The emphasis on peace and friendship as a counterweight to nationalism is not in evidence.

The ideological undertones separating the CCTV and NBC commentaries when it comes to

nationalism, the state, and the Party are striking. CCTV's audience is allowed to bask in the glories of patriotic fervor by linking nationalism to the universal values of peace and friendship. The state and Party are one, and the road ahead is clear. These narratives cement the notion that the state and the Party have righted the injustices of history and brought China level with the West. An ideological invitation is in the air: accept China's current system of capitalism with authoritarian state control because it has delivered and will continue to deliver. For NBC, however, full-blown nationalism and the role of the Party are airbrushed out of the scene along with the notion that China has only peaceful and friendly intentions. Cultural relativism allows a particularistic acceptance of a role for the state in China that would hardly be acceptable for many in the United States. Once again, the seeds of ideological divisiveness are planted.

### **History and Culture**

The interpretations of Chinese history and culture offered in the CCTV and NBC presentations likewise present surface similarities that give way to an ideological divide upon closer scrutiny. For CCTV, history and culture seamlessly and unproblematically inform the present, buttressing the political legitimacy of the party-state. For NBC, history and culture are isolated, Orientalized snapshots that make China alluring but do not speak to current political arrangements. As we shall see, both narratives depend on massive historical erasures.

CCTV offers a suturing narrative of a China that has evolved unproblematically, with history and cultural tradition seamlessly informing the present. Openness and friendship are not just contemporary national qualities. They have characterized the long Chinese tradition and smoothed the move from tradition to modernity. In the CCTV rendition, Chinese history moves ever upward, with forward progress being made as the past gives way to the present.

CCTV's China evolves easily from a magnificent past of Confucian values, cultural high water

marks, practical inventions, and maritime prowess to a glittering modern present that offers the unlimited promise of better things to come in the future. Traditional culture has both a fixed reference point in the primordial past as well as an ability to change and organically evolve practices that help inform the modern world. Chinese cultural traditions reinforce the current Party discourse championed by President Hu Jintao that calls for the establishment of a harmonious society. Culture in the CCTV narrative is inflected with political meaning.

NBC moves through the same terrain on some levels mirroring CCTV in glorifying Chinese history and culture and celebrating the openness of the past as an indication of the preferred path for the future. But a closer look at the network's representations reveals an ideological schism with CCTV's version. For NBC, Chinese history and culture are subjects of fetishized fascination. History is compartmentalized as postcard snapshots of the past. Any infusion of tradition into modern life in the NBC narrative occurs in an Orientalized context.

Two vignettes depicting the silk road and China's voyages of maritime exploration further illustrate the surface similarities and the underlying ideological divisions. In CCTV's rendering, these representations provide evidence of Chinese friendliness and openness *throughout history* and the people's respectful, reciprocal approach to economic and cultural exchange. There are two historic silk roads in CCTV's commentary: one by land and the other by sea. In the first vignette, a bejeweled dancer who performs on what appears to be a floating carpet holds two ribbons, one symbolizing the land and the other signifying the sea route. She is projecting the idea of Chinese friendship and respectful cross-cultural learning under the rubric of the Confucian concept of *li*.<sup>25</sup> The maritime scene that follows not only depicts the high point of Chinese navigational skill and the movement of iconic Chinese products such as pottery and tea to the West, but it also shows the courage and wisdom of the

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<sup>25</sup> "Confucius," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, September 5, 2006, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/confucius/>.

Chinese people as they successfully challenge nature. The scene proves “the friendliness and affection of the civilized nation of China throughout history,” in the words of the CCTV commentator.

In NBC's presentation, the silk road and maritime adventures represent particular moments in Chinese history. They indeed signify openness and great material benefit and reinforce the idea that further Chinese moves down the reform (read capitalism coupled with greater market openness and a democratic, pluralistic political system) will bring even more prosperity, but they do not suggest any universal Chinese value of friendliness. The ribbon dancer who depicts the silk road is rooted in the Tang Dynasty, and the NBC commentators make no mention of what the ribbons signify. They speak of the overland silk road; there is no talk of a sea silk road. The maritime scene specifically represents the adventures of Admiral Zheng He, the fifteenth century Ming Dynasty explorer whom Ramo identifies as China's Christopher Columbus. (CCTV does not name any historical figures in its commentary.) The scene exemplifies China's “wonderful maritime tradition” and demonstrates that Zheng He was the first to master the use of the magnetic compass, says Ramo. The commentary highlights accomplishments specific to one historical epoch, feeding a discourse that casts China's maritime inventiveness as specific to a bygone era. Why China did not build on its seafaring prowess is not raised. Sailing with more men and more ships farther than anyone had ever done in human history until that point is just part of a “wonderful” tradition.

NBC looks at the East-West exchanges differently from CCTV. While the Chinese network projects the idea of mutually respectful trade that showcases the movement of Chinese goods to the West, Ramo says the ribbon dancer represents China “casting their most precious things, silk and Chinese cultural values, out to the world, and getting in return all sorts of amazing ideas.” China is “casting,” which conjures up the image of a fabulously wealthy society that can afford to rid itself of precious goods because it has them in abundance. The exchange is one of goods for ideas, which tracks with the contemporary influx of Western capitalist ideas into China in exchange for exports of

everything from clothes to flat-screen television sets. It is a far cry from the CCTV narrative's emphasis on reciprocal exchanges that highlight the discovery in the West of iconic Chinese cultural treasures.

The maritime vignette in the NBC presentation likewise establishes it as a historically specific cultural marker and curiosity. The importance of Admiral Zheng He's voyages is that he was the first in the world to use the magnetic compass. This is yet another specific indication of a magnificent but isolated Chinese technological and cultural achievement. The magnetic compass can take its place beside the invention of paper, printing, and gunpowder. But that is as far as it goes in the NBC presentation. As remarkable as they are, these inventions and innovations are points in a long historical landscape. They are cultural fetishes. This is far from the CCTV rendering that makes the voyages a part of the forward progress of Chinese history and links them to timeless values of courage, friendliness, and civility of the Chinese people and nation.

Both presentations glorify openness, trade, cultural exchange and global exploration, another promotion of the idea that China's future lies unmistakably in further integration with the global economic system. Yet, CCTV and NBC suggest very different paths and challenges in reaching that goal. For CCTV, reciprocity, mutual respect, and the export of Chinese cultural products loom large. For NBC, the indications of past achievements, which for CCTV reveal inherent Chinese character traits, are isolated, Orientalized curiosities that provide historical examples that should be emulated in a modern context. If China would open itself as fully as it did during the Tang dynasty, the nation perhaps would get to a point where it could again cast off its riches in return for ideas from a superior West. The terms of engagement between the highly developed West and developing, yet always peripheral, China could be maintained. China could remain, in Bhabha's configuration, "almost the same but not quite."<sup>26</sup>

Both networks' views of the fifteenth century voyages of discovery as the high point of Chinese

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26 Bhabha, "The Other Question," 122.

maritime prowess depend on glossing over a profound question in Chinese history: why the Ming rulers abandoned sea power at the very historical moment when Western states were beginning to rely on it for imperial expansion? Historians Louise Levathes and Bruce Swanson point to an ideologically informed bureaucratic elite who were prone to infighting, weakened by corruption, preoccupied with domestic concerns, disdainful of merchants, and unable to see the value in naval power hardly bodes well for either network's interpretation of the maritime vignette.<sup>27</sup> The historical facts and interpretation would undercut CCTV's narrative of the maritime adventures showing the wisdom, openness, and friendliness of the Chinese people and would raise potentially embarrassing parallels with the current day. If bureaucratic imperial rulers in Ming times could make a bad decision, repress a potentially rising merchant class, and quickly turn the state in a disastrous direction, who is to say that the contemporary bureaucratic (Communist) elite could not do the same – in other words ruin China's stunning, if uneven, economic growth? For CCTV, raising the question would destroy its narrative of seamless, unproblematic development and the harmonious folding of the traditional into the modern. It also would expose a historical weakness, calling attention to the humiliation that is supposedly a thing of the past. NBC's interpretation of the voyages as a “wonderful” tradition likewise would be threatened by the injection of too much historical reality. If maritime prowess was such a tradition, why did China not develop the world's largest navy in the modern period? The highlighting of the voyages of discovery as brilliant moments in history and nothing more prevents either network from having to address the question of why China was unable to successfully face the challenge of Western imperialism. Furthermore, a discussion of Western encroachment in China would hardly enhance the entertainment value of either broadcast.

The idea, offered by CCTV, that China was always open and interested in engaging in respectful,

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<sup>27</sup> Louise Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne 1405-1433* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 174–181; Bruce Swanson, *Eighth Voyage of the Dragon: A History of China's Quest for Seapower* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1982), 40–43.

reciprocal trade also depends on a series of historical erasures. For centuries Chinese dynasties were preoccupied with questions of how to deal with foreigners of various stripes. Invasions and rebellions were periodic, and military preparedness was a constant concern. To a lesser or greater degree, China's rulers for many centuries employed a tributary system in which foreign traders offered gifts to the emperors in exchange for the right to do business. NBC's contention that the Tang Dynasty marks the high point of Chinese historical openness relies on a one-dimensional view of a period that was, to be sure, characterized by openness but also featured periodic attacks on foreigners and repression of trade.

Historical erasures of different kinds characterize the commentaries by both networks on scenes that highlight the Chinese invention of moveable block printing, an innovation that was not actually used extensively in pre-modern China but was extraordinarily important in the development of the West. In this extended vignette, the blocks rise from beneath the floor of the stadium and undulate in a rhythmic pattern, forming the Chinese character for harmony three times. Both CCTV and NBC tell their audiences that moveable block printing, or as CCTV calls it the printing press, is one China's key historic inventions. CCTV notes that printing is one of four key Chinese inventions, the other three being paper, the compass, and gunpowder.<sup>28</sup> In the CCTV commentary, the four inventions, like other signifiers of tradition, are examples of glorious technological innovations that fold easily into modernity and help define the contemporary Chinese character. NBC mentions only printing and paper as specific inventions, and treats them as Orientalized cultural curiosities. In introducing the moveable block scene, Lauer talks to the audience about what is significant about holding the Olympics in China saying: "Well, how many places could you go around the world where the culture is old enough where you can say, oh, by the way, the Chinese invented paper and printing. And that's actually true here."

Moveable printing was in fact invented in China but proved too cumbersome for widespread use.

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<sup>28</sup> CCTV mentions gunpowder, an invention that has decidedly non-friendly, non-peaceful overtones, only once in passing during the Opening Ceremony commentary. Too much mention of gunpowder could call to mind the Opium Wars and other instances when the West made good use this Chinese invention to gain concessions from a weak Qing Dynasty.

Non-moveable blocks that were manually lined up and fixed in place turned out to be much more appropriate for printing in a language of single ideographs, even though the technique required vast warehouses for storage between press runs. The moveable printing press was not widely adopted in China until the late nineteenth century, the result of the importing of Western technology. In light of this history, a nuanced discussion of the invention of moveable printing could threaten to remove the printing press as a signifier for both networks of China's one-time technological superiority. Too much exposure of the history also could raise embarrassing questions about why China was outdistanced by the West in an invention of its own. A signifier of technological prodigy could be turned into a symbol of historical failure.

Historical erasures underlie ideological differences in how CCTV and NBC deal with China's cultural-religious traditions. NBC makes it clear early in the broadcast that all three of China's cultural-religious traditions – Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism – will be touched on in the program. While NBC provides extensive commentary on all three, CCTV covers only Confucianism, making no mention of either Buddhism or Taoism.

CCTV's exclusion of Buddhism and Taoism and NBC's emphasis on them are particularly striking. Ramo introduces the three traditions just after the opening drum scene as performers representing flying apsaras, or supernatural women who appear in Buddhist mythology, are seen suspended in the air over the stadium as if by magic. Ramo says they “will be familiar to anybody who has seen Buddhist iconography anywhere in the world.” He goes on to declare that they symbolize peace and harmony and are found in the Dunhuang desert caves in Sichuan Province, “which are wonderfully preserved Buddhist art masterpieces.” Ramo does not say so, but the caves are a major tourist destination and presumably would be familiar with at least some members of the audience. CCTV ignores the Buddhist element in the apsaras, calling them only “beautiful fliers.” CCTV likewise makes no reference anywhere in its presentation to Taoism, despite unstated links between the

performance vignettes and the religious tradition that NBC points to. It is not NBC's only mention of Buddhism and Taoism. Later, when Ramo is describing the printing press morphing into a representation of a water drop on a still pond, he links the stillness and silence of the scene to all three of the major Chinese traditions, in which the cultivation of inner peace leads to external peace.

The omission particularly of the obvious Buddhist representation is a stunning lacuna that further illustrates what CCTV incorporates, and what it does not include, under the sign of tradition. In political terms, it evidently reflects the Party's decision to build a narrative of nation and culture that will serve its own legitimacy by erasing two of China's three great traditions. It also apparently reflects the Party's allergy to any kind of possible competing power center, which Buddhism and Taoism, as religious and philosophical systems, represent. Buddhism is particularly sensitive because of its association with Tibet and the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan political and Tibetan Buddhist spiritual leader. While NBC seems to be going out of its way to make viewers aware that China has three major philosophical and religious traditions, CCTV makes it clear that only one – Confucianism – is officially sanctioned by performing the auditory version of airbrushing Buddhism and Taoism. Confucius and Confucianism play a large role in the ceremony and in the CCTV and NBC presentations and therefore warrant a thorough discussion.

### **Confucius and Harmony**

Competing views of Confucius and Confucianism in the presentations illustrate another aspect of the ideological disjunction between CCTV and NBC. For CCTV, the interpretation of Confucius is central to the fusing of tradition and modernity and the notion that the current regime embodies moral

values that bestow legitimacy on the party-state. NBC, on the other hand, presents Confucius as a

worthy sage who is a historic and cultural figure, but the network links him only tenuously to the party-state and its current leadership.

At the outset of the ceremony, CCTV makes it clear that the Confucian value of *li* is at the core of the Chinese conception of political culture. With the Confucian drummers performing, commentator Sun speaks of manners, civility, and ceremony embodied in the concept. Commentator Zhou then incorporates the idea of friendliness, hospitality, and inclusiveness, telling the audience the drummers are intoning the actual words of Confucius himself as written in the *Lun Yu*, or *Analects of Confucius*. Zhou does not mention the words, and they are not superimposed on the screen. The important message in this scene is the expression of hospitality and friendship. “We are using this unique way to express Beijing's most sincere welcoming emotion,” says says.

The phrase from the *Lun Yu* that is central to CCTV's ideological messaging comes later, in the scene when Confucian scholars make their way in formation to the center of the stadium floor. It is here that the scholars chant *wen xing zhong xin*, conjuring up a chain of signification that touches on loyalty, honesty, ethics, and learning. Confucius and the *Lun Yu*, linked earlier to friendliness and hospitality, now have a far deeper signification. The qualities embodied in *wen xing zhong xin* are valuable for the forging of a modern state and disciplining a modern people. For an authoritarian state, loyalty would be of great importance.

CCTV's assignment of the authorship of the *Lun Yu* to Confucius himself is part of a story of nation that builds on texts and traditions that have deep historical roots. The specific interpretation of Confucianism offered by CCTV is merely the latest in the many ways that it has been refashioned to suit current needs. The *Lun Yu* is believed to have been written 400 years after the death of Confucius, but it has been rearranged, reinterpreted, and annotated countless times in the course of history, and many different images and caricatures of the sage have been propagated over the years to suit changing

needs.<sup>29</sup> It is a historical leap of faith to assert that the exact words from today's *Lun Yu* are the very ones crafted by Confucius himself.

NBC, in its description of the drum and scholar scenes, takes a more superficial path to the signification of the *Lun Yu*, linking it only to welcoming friends from far away. During the drum performance, Ramo makes the same move as CCTV, telling the audience that the drummers are chanting the actual words of Confucius written 2,500 years ago. During the scholar scene, Ramo offers a thumbnail biography of Confucius but does not mention or translate *wen, xing, zhong xin*, the words being intoned. He says Confucianism is a “really powerful” tradition in China but offers no elaboration. The ideological effect is that it allows NBC to avoid a discussion of the deeper meaning of *wen, xing, zhong xin* and how Confucian values tie into broader cultural or political themes in the ceremony. For CCTV, the broader signification becomes clear as the ceremony progresses. Confucianism is given definition through the intoning of *wen xing zhong xin* from the *Lun Yu*, and values such as civility and manners are tied to openness when it comes to foreigners and to the idea of Hu Jintao's harmonious society. But with NBC, the message to the audience is one dimensional. These are words that mean China is welcoming friends from around the world. Intentionally or not, the network is blocking the chain of signification that CCTV opens.

Competing views of the *fou* drums used in the opening scene illustrate a clear ideological divide. For CCTV, the drums are linked to China's primordial origins in the Xia and Shang dynasties. They are an object and signifier in the wider narrative that constructs China as a nation that has fully incorporated the traditional into the modern. For NBC, the drums are specific cultural artifacts, discovered in a particular place at a particular time. They date to a specific period around 500 BC. They are linked to Confucius only because the drummers who beat on them in the opening vignette are

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<sup>29</sup> Michael Nylan and Thomas Wilson, *Lives of Confucius: Civilization's Greatest Sage Through the Ages*, 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2010), 1–28.

intoning the words of the sage. The descriptions and depictions, in other words, are part of the NBC narrative that makes Chinese cultural artifacts into items of Orientalized, exotic wonder.

In a later scene, CCTV links Confucianism to the Communist Party's call to build a harmonious society. As the Chinese character for harmony, *he*, appears on the stadium floor for the third time, commentator Zhou says it expresses the Confucian concept of humanism, which embodies harmony and “shows that the Chinese people's idea of harmony stems from an excellent tradition in Chinese history.” The narrative draws a direct connection between Confucian values and the core concepts at the heart of the party-state.

NBC is hardly that expansive about Confucius. The network associates him with harmony but does not cement the semiotic link to the Communist Party and Chinese state. In the American network's view Confucius was a scholar who roamed China at a time of great chaos 2,500 years ago and dispensed advice to rulers about how to achieve harmony. Ramo mentions that a depiction of drops on an empty pond calls to mind Confucian self-cultivation. The commentator provides another example, as a representation of the printing press undulates on the stadium floor.

These moving blocks which are eliciting quite a reaction here in the Bird's Nest are evoking something that many Chinese viewers will recognize. This is wind and recalls one of Confucius's most famous phrases: the idea that the virtuous leader can pass across his subjects with the ease of the wind.

There is no suggestion that the current leaders of China are the kind of virtuous leaders that Ramo's Confucius would have had in mind. Ramo makes no association between this Confucian ideal and any worldly political arrangement. It stands alone as an expression of a Confucian political culture isolated from current practices. (CCTV, for its part, makes only an indirect political linkage in this portion of the ceremony. Commentator Zhou says the blocks flying like the wind show the evolution of *he*, the character for harmony.) By treating Confucius as a cultural curiosity and distancing Confucian harmony from the party-state's version of the concept, NBC is once again providing a narrative that fits

within the bounds of Orientalism. Confucianism is something to be regarded highly but ultimately more as an exotic relic of history than a living political philosophy.

NBC finesses the question of harmony and its use by the Communist Party. After Ramo calls harmony “a core philosophical conception,” Lauer adds that it is a “core political ideal as well.” Ramo follows that by saying harmony is at the heart of “Chinese political doctrine at the moment.” This statement marks the only time in the NBC presentation that a word that could be interpreted as pejorative – doctrine – is semiotically associated with harmony, and the moment is quickly deflected through the use of humor. Ramo uses the Chinese phrase for harmonious society, *hexue shehui*, and Costas immediately jokes, “I’m glad you said that,” referring to Ramo’s ability to speak Chinese. Chuckles are heard, setting up the last word on the subject as Ramo notes that many things today in China are “profoundly disharmonious.” But he shies away from mentioning issues of human rights, the legacy of the Tiananmen crackdown, the gap between rich and poor, or the few ruling the many. Ramo provides examples of disharmony in China that could easily be culled from any economically advanced, democratic country on earth: “challenges with the environment, urbanization, and so forth.” Harmony, Ramo concludes, is merely an ideal for the Chinese, something that perhaps will be realized in the future.

In ideological terms, the NBC text in one sense counters CCTV’s suturing narrative that seeks to settle a profound historical question in recent Chinese history and infuse the party-state with the political authority of China’s Confucian tradition. But the American network in another sense is providing ideological cover for the party-state by shielding it from wide exposure of its authoritarian or even totalitarian tendencies. NBC is threading a fine ideological needle, making it clear that the Communist Party does not have the full imprimatur of the Confucian heritage but not engaging in a deeper discussion of the nature of the Chinese political system and the Party’s use of sloganeering. Instead, the network settles on discreetly and backhandedly making the semiotic link between harmony,

doctrine, and propaganda. But even that linkage is countered by other references to harmony that are neutral or even laudatory. Toward the end of the ceremony, Lauer, for example, portrays the Chinese president as statesman-like, calling Hu Jintao's appeal for harmony one of his “most striking messages.”

### **Construction of the People**

CCTV and NBC construct portraits of the Chinese people that reflect competing ideological visions of what is necessary for China's full integration into the wider capitalist world. CCTV enumerates a long list of qualities that the people collectively possess and exude. They are hard working, cheerful, peace-loving, and uncomplaining. In CCTV's rendering, thousands of years of Chinese tradition have infused the value of labor into the people's minds. The Chinese people are inheritors of the qualities embodied by the builders of the Great Wall. The people revere and celebrate their own culture but at the same time want to embrace the world. They have high moral standards and refined tastes. They embrace the Olympic spirit of fairness and self-sacrifice. The descriptions always refer to the collective Chinese people, never to any one individual. The Chinese people, in other words, possess the discipline and talent to succeed in a world of hard work and little reward.

For CCTV, a state broadcaster with a didactic function, the enumeration of qualities is as much a prescription as a description. It is a means of disciplining the citizenry by explaining the qualities that are expected of them. As with other such pronouncements in the CCTV broadcast, the list may include qualities that the regime believes are insufficiently strong or lacking in the Chinese work force, or insufficiently understood by the outside world. The overall message is that to sustain the stunning economic growth that has vaulted the nation into a position of equalizing Eastern and Western culture, China needs a modern citizenry, disciplined to work efficiently and productively without making unreasonable demands.

NBC presents the Chinese people as individuals caught in an oppressive system that at times

herds them into a repressive collectivity. They are described in a favorable light when they are seen as individuals rather than members of a collectivity. This can be seen clearly in the presentation of two scenes that involve massive numbers of Chinese men. The 2,008, fierce-looking Chinese drummers who open the ceremony lead the NBC commentators to suggest that their regimentation might pose some kind of unspecified threat. They are a little intimidating. But in the later scene that depicts the undulating printing blocks that morph into the Great Wall, the network's presenters are overwhelmed with awe and good cheer when, at the end of the vignette, performers who had been shielded from view inside the blocks emerge smiling widely and waving to the crowd. The performers wave in a chaotic pattern – the polar opposite of the stern, synchronized drummers – and are viewed with warmth and relief. The NBC commentators marvel that they had accomplished the task entirely through manual labor and not with machinery. The metaphorical and ideological implications are striking. The West fears Chinese totalitarian impulses signified by the drummers while at the same time hopes that smiling and waving (read low-priced, competent, and compliant) Chinese laborers will fill a needed niche in the global capitalist structure. Low paid, efficient Chinese workers can make the mass produced, standardized goods that technologically advanced, higher level economies such as the United States invent, design, and market. The neoliberal economic alignment between core and peripheral nations does not have to change. The U.S. can retain its place as standard bearer for the core of wealthy nations while China remains on the edges. Economically, China still is “almost the same but not quite.” The NBC interpretations of the two scenes is all the more striking because CCTV lets both moments pass without comment. For the Chinese network, they apparently are entirely unremarkable.

NBC, in fact, goes out of its way to distort Chinese reality in the process of projecting the image of Chinese individuality. In the scene where the children dressed as minorities carry the flag to the soldiers, Lauer announces that they are ordinary children from Chinese art schools in the area. It is an absurd claim, and U.S. reporting in the days after the Opening Ceremony revealed that the “minorities”

were child actors who were mostly members of the Han majority ethnic group.<sup>30</sup> In any event, competition for a place as a performer in the Opening Ceremony would be anything but ordinary; it would be an Olympian struggle in itself, with powerful elites – i.e. high ranking Party members and their relatives – potentially exercising great influence. In addition, elites in China enjoy advantages in gaining entry into art and other speciality schools for their offspring. It is likely that the pool of children in any art school would be heavily weighted in favor of the elites. But NBC's commentary buries these notions. The identification as “average” by NBC infuses the children with a sense of American-style individuality. To be ordinary in an American context is to have an equal opportunity to make something of one's life, to avoid being a cog in society's giant wheels. The implication is that the children from the art schools are similar kinds of individuals, another example of “almost the same but not quite.”

NBC's commentary also obscures the party-state's penchant for aesthetic perfectionism, a characteristic that clashes with American conceptions of artistic genuineness and fair play. Although the lip synching in “Ode to the Motherland” probably was unknown to NBC at the time of the broadcast, the network clearly was aware that fireworks seen on television in the form of steps were computer generated. In describing these fireworks, Lauer calls their appearance a “cinematic device” that is “almost animation.” Following reports in subsequent days that the steps were computer graphics and not actual fireworks, MSNBC put out a statement saying the NBC commentators “made mention of the alteration,” implying that Lauer had been forthright in telling the audience that the fireworks were computer generated, which in fact he was not.<sup>31</sup> Lauer's commentary leaves a vague impression at best.

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30 James Fallows, “Their Own Worst Enemy,” *The Atlantic*, November 2008, <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200811/chinese-progress>; Lisa de Moraes of The Washington Post wrote that the children were child actors, members of the Galaxy Children's Art Troupe comprised mostly from China's Han ethnic majority. “They're like the white people of China,” she said. See Lisa de Moraes, “Something Else at the Olympics Rings False,” *The Washington Post*, August 16, 2008, sec. The TV Column.

31 “Part of Olympic Display Altered in Broadcast,” *MSNBC.com*, August 11, 2008, [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/26139005/ns/technology\\_and\\_science-tech\\_and\\_gadgets/t/part-olympic-display-altered-broadcast/#.TrCWxHEzLMQ](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/26139005/ns/technology_and_science-tech_and_gadgets/t/part-olympic-display-altered-broadcast/#.TrCWxHEzLMQ).

In ideological terms, the fudging of the nature of the fireworks alleviates NBC of the need to explain why the Chinese organizers – Zhang Yimou in NBC's narrative – would resort to such a tactic. It is one more area of potential friction that NBC artfully avoids.

Even when NBC explains the cultural specificity of Chinese collectivity, it is done in a way that highlights individuality. During the silk road scene in which the ribbon dancer performs on what looks like a carpet, Ramo explains that Zhang Yimou is making an unmistakable statement about the relationship in China between the individual and the collective. “Zhang Yimou, who is a master of visual symbolism, obviously here sending a message that great accomplishments, great individual accomplishments, particularly in this society, rely on much more than the individual alone,” Ramo says. The focus of Ramo's commentary is on individual accomplishments and how they come about in China. The primary focus of the scene is the dancer, and how she represents, in Ramo's words, “the tremendous openness of China at that time and the result which was an unbelievable cultural and economic blossoming.” The NBC approach contrasts starkly with the CCTV presentation, which never mentions individual accomplishments and refers to people only in a collective sense.

In ideological terms, each network is presenting its preferred construction of the Chinese people. To face the challenges of the future, CCTV's people must collectively offer the kind of labor force required to fuel global manufacturing. They must be hard working, skilled, flexible, and not prone to complain (read strike). The ideological vision projected in the NBC narrative may have the same underlying goal, but it exalts individuality and associates collectivity with the lingering negative aspects of Communist rule as reported by the U.S. media: totalitarian control, overt repression, and the denial of human rights.

### **Incoherent Narratives**

The critical comparison of the CCTV and NBC broadcasts demonstrates how two sets of narratives offer strikingly different ideological projections about China's rise as a power and

engagement with the wider capitalist world. For CCTV, China has finally righted a longstanding historical injustice and established itself as a co-equal nation among nations. The Chinese version of authoritarian state capitalism can stand as a beacon of developmental prowess, and the Chinese Communist Party can be thanked for bringing about this splendid result. China offers only peace and friendship to the world, and its rise comes with no threat. China is a proud, patriotic nation, united and as strong as steel, but adherence to the universal values of peace and friendship means Chinese nationalism is a progressive, not xenophobic force. The nation's long and proud history and culture inform modern practices, without any hint of conflict or contradiction. Openness has been a special Chinese characteristic throughout its long history, as shown by two silk roads, one by land and one by sea. Confucianism, an ancient and worthy system of beliefs that emphasize loyalty and righteousness, informs the harmonious designs that the Communist Party has for modern China, ensuring that future possibilities will have no limit. The Chinese inventions – especially of printing, paper, and the compass – and its former maritime greatness have provided a cultural heritage that informs the character of the modern Chinese people. The narratives underpin China's soft power campaign taking shape around the world.

NBC's presentation projects a profoundly nervous, ambivalent view of China's rise. China can be seen in a new light, and for the first time the state seems able to take care of the welfare of its people. But there are troubling, even frightening signs. China's terms of engagement with world capitalism are far from settled. There is no declaration of East-West equality, and no celebration of the Communist Party for putting China on a path to recover its former greatness. Reforms that by implication will help clear China of its non-democratic, totalitarian, and economically mercantilist sheen are needed before the country can be fully embraced. Still, there is much to admire in the steps the nation has taken to move to a system where the people can freely choose how to live their lives, and the Chinese people themselves want to leave their Communist past behind. Even so, this is a not a

moment to either embrace the claim that China is in essence peace-loving or offer overt criticism over issues like environmental degradation.

Neither network narrative tracks well with the realities and complexities of contemporary Chinese life. Neither touched adequately – or at all – on the monumental, historic changes that had been sweeping the country: the elevation of hundreds of millions of people from poverty to a middle class life full of hope but also anxiety and challenge to social structures and confusion about values and mores, the movement of hundreds of millions of migrant workers who form the working class backbone of China's manufacturing prowess but are treated as second-class citizens, the sense of widespread corruption that has accompanied the accelerating divide between rich and poor, and the intricate and extensive economic linkage between China and the United States that makes the two nations uneasy if inseparable partners, just to name a few serious items of inquiry.

The notion that China is peace loving and seeks friendly relations and sustainable development – one of the prime narratives in the CCTV presentation – is a major expression of Beijing's efforts to project soft power. In the years following the Games, that effort has accelerated as evidenced by CCTV's launch of a U.S.-based, English language news operation<sup>32</sup> and the establishment of a series of Confucius Institutes across the U.S. The soft power campaign already has had major successes in Asia.<sup>33</sup>

The projection of soft power is an effort to blunt what Chinese leaders have long seen as an attempt by the West, and the United States in particular, to promote a policy of “peaceful evolution,” or the idea that China's Communist system can be undermined and eventually overthrown by incremental

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32 David Barboza, “China Yearns to Form Its Own Media Empires,” *The New York Times* (Shanghai, China, October 5, 2009), sec. Business/Global Business, B1; Lara Farrar, “Can Chinese media rule the airwaves?,” News, *CNN.com*, September 3, 2010, <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/BUSINESS/09/03/china.media.expansion/index.html>; Matthew Garrahan and Kathrin Hille, “China to expand English language TV service,” Newspaper, *FT.com*, November 7, 2011, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/28a4cecec-0965-11e1-a2bb-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1edyJQCb>; David Shambaugh, “China Flexes Its Soft Power,” *The New York Times*, June 7, 2010, sec. Opinion, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/08/opinion/08iht-edshambaugh.html>; “The Chinese are coming,” Magazine, *Economist.com*, March 4, 2010, <http://www.economist.com/node/15607496>.

33 Young Nam Cho and Jong Ho Jeong, “China’s Soft Power: Discussions, Resources, and Prospects,” *Asian Survey* 48,

changes that eventually will result in the installation of liberal democracy.<sup>34</sup> In CCTV's presentation of the Opening Ceremony, fears about peaceful evolution are never stated, but concern that China's peaceful intentions are not sufficiently understood are implied by the relentless repetition of the theme. In the policy world, these issues are very much on the surface and openly discussed. Concern about peaceful evolution has been a constant in Chinese foreign policy since the idea was articulated by U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles in the 1950s.<sup>35</sup> The idea that China suffered years of humiliation at the hands of the West – a theme that underlies the 100-year struggle in the CCTV broadcast to host the Olympics – provides the historical background for modern distrust. Concerns about peaceful evolution have been re-articulated over the years, following the Tiananmen bloodbath and as China moved into a model, far afield from Maoist central planning, that features an authoritarian, state capitalism dominated by the Communist Party. Qi Zhou notes that Chinese publications assert that U.S. advocacy of human rights is a tool of a policy of peaceful evolution. The aim is thought to be the imposition of a Western political system and Western values on China.<sup>36</sup> A flavor of the official concern about peaceful evolution can be seen this statement from former Chinese President Jiang Zemin.

International hostile forces will never stop using peaceful evolution against us for a single day. Bourgeois liberalization is an internal matching force which they use to carry out peaceful evolution. These kinds of hostile activities constitute a real threat to China's independence, sovereignty, development and reform. In other words, peaceful evolution and bourgeois liberalization are aimed not only at overthrowing our socialist system but, fundamentally, at depriving us of our national independence and state sovereignty.<sup>37</sup>

The Chinese leadership's use of soft power to counter fears of peaceful evolution is consistent with a policy articulated by Deng Xiaoping, who famously emphasized the need to maintain world peace so that China could reach the level of developed nations in 30 to 50 years. An official online publication

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no. 3 (June 1, 2008): 453-472.

34 Russell Ong, "'Peaceful Evolution', 'Regime Change' and China's Political Security," *Journal of Contemporary China* 16, no. 53 (November 2007): 717-727.

35 Russell Ong, *China's Security Interests in the 21st Century*, Routledge Security in Asia Series 5 (London, New York: Routledge, 2007), 22.

36 Zhou Qi, "Conflicts over Human Rights Between China and the US," *Human Rights Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (February 1, 2005): 111-112.

37 Thomas Kane, "China's Foundations: Guiding Principles of Chinese Foreign Policy," *Comparative Strategy* 20, no. 1 (March 2001): 52-53.

of the Communist Party's Central Committee quotes Deng as saying: "Safeguarding world peace is not an empty talk. It is our need, also the need of all states of the world."<sup>38</sup> Ezra Vogel, the noted China scholar and author of a recent biography of Deng, says forging good relations with the major powers of the world was a cornerstone of his policy.<sup>39</sup>

From the official U.S. point of view, the question of how relations with China will evolve and whether the rise of the world's most populous nation will result in conflict with the United States is very much on the table – a notion that is reflected in NBC's ambivalence about China. U.S. government attitudes and policies toward China have straddled conflicting policy line and ideas. Zhu Zhiqun sees U.S. policy toward China as being influenced by realists on one side and idealists on the other. Policy has been aimed at both engaging China economically and containing it militarily, particularly in regard to Taiwan, resulting in a mix of contention and cooperation in the relationship between the two states. The U.S. goal has been to prevent the rise of China from undermining U.S. interests while at the same time preventing the emergence of hostility from China.<sup>40</sup> Taiwan is of such importance that Andrew Kennedy argues that Chinese views of U.S. policies toward Taiwan provide a benchmark for understanding overall U.S. intentions toward China.<sup>41</sup>

Aaron Friedberg sees U.S. policy-making toward China as being informed by a cross-current of orientations within the foreign policy establishment that he broadly characterizes as belonging to liberals, realists, and constructivists. Liberals are generally optimists who believe in the "pacifying

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38 "The Objective of CPC's International Relations," *International Department Central Committee of CPC*, 2007, <http://www.idcpc.org.cn/english/inrelations/objective.htm>.

39 "Revisiting Deng Xiaoping: A Word With Ezra F. Vogel," Newspaper, *The New York Times: ArtsBeat Blog*, October 21, 2011, <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/10/21/revisiting-deng-xiaoping-a-word-with-ezra-f-vogel/>.

40 Zhiqun Zhu, *US-China Relations in the 21st Century: Power Transition and Peace*, Politics in Asia Series (London ; New York: Routledge, 2006).

41 Andrew Bingham Kennedy, "China's Perceptions of U.S. Intentions Toward Taiwan: How Hostile a Hegemon?," *Asian Survey* 47, no. 2 (April 1, 2007): 268–287.

power of economic integration,” the salutary effects of involvement in international organizations, and democratization. Some liberals are pessimists who fear that Chinese moves toward capitalistic reforms and democracy will lead to hyper-nationalism and trouble for the United States. Realists generally are pessimists who see international relations in terms of inevitable conflict among states motivated by objective power realities. In this view, rising powers such as China tend to make trouble. Some realists are optimists, however. They believe that China is weaker than it is often portrayed and that the nation's rise is not as rapid as many believe. These conditions mean that China's aims will be limited for a long time to come and will not necessarily be aggressive. The final group in Friedberg's typology consists of the constructivists, who regard perceptions and beliefs in the minds of policy-makers and not objective power realities as decisive. Constructivists are also divided into optimists, who believe that engagement and interaction can change beliefs and national identity, and pessimists, who express concern that such changes could well evolve in a direction that is unfavorable to U.S. aims because old discourses and animosities are difficult to break. China, in this view, could continue to feel bullied by the United States, which would reinforce historic memories of the years of humiliation and shame.<sup>42</sup>

The wariness about China and Chinese intentions reflected in U.S. foreign policy debates parallels the ambivalence expressed in NBC's presentation of the Opening Ceremony. How to handle a rising China, both in terms of foreign policy and in terms of media interpretation, is very much on the table. The question of whether China ultimately will be friend or foe is an open one. By contrast, the CCTV narratives demonstrate that Beijing's soft power campaign has a clear and unmistakable message: China has reclaimed its proper place on the world stage, and everyone should recognize the great nation's peaceful and progressive role in the world. Reconciling these contrasting views will not be easy, but how it unfolds will be of vital importance, both in the foreign policy and media worlds.

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<sup>42</sup> Aaron L. Friedberg, “The Future of U.S.-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?,” *International Security* 30, no. 2 (October 1, 2005): 7–45.

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