

CULTURE MATTERS

Hyperreal Beijing, 888

By Ma Shengmei

The Beijing Olympics is set to commence on August 8, 2008, promising great fanfare in an opening ceremony orchestrated by fifth-generation filmmaker Zhang Yimou, assisted by what the *People's Daily* dubs the “five-tiger generals,” including Chinese celebrities such as “fireworks” artist Cai Guoqiang.¹ The number 888 is pronounced “bu, bu, bu” (as in “but”) in Cantonese and is considered close to “fu, fu, fu” (as in the f-word) for “prosper, prosper, prosper.” A Cantonese habit long adopted by the whole country, Chinese officials deliberately chose the auspicious date of 888 (08/08/2008) for the Games, which are intended to demonstrate China’s prowess to the world.

Sports, after all, have long been the proving ground, literally and metaphorically, for Asia to showcase its modernity vis-à-vis its adversary, the West. Dominated by Western (neo)colonial powers, the East, during the Cold War and today, resorts to the seemingly peaceful athletic arena and its tropes to prove its worth. Hence, the lingo of track and field competition suffuses East-West rivalry. During the Cold War, the nuclear race and the race to the moon were watershed events. Chairman Mao’s disastrous Great Leap Forward of the 1950s touted the slogan “Surpass England and Catch Up with America.” And in the 1970s, Sino-U.S. relations were channeled into a game of “ping-pong diplomacy,” far friendlier than late-Qing “gunboat diplomacy.” “Ping-pong diplomacy” places both parties in good stead: China makes contact from a position of strength; the U.S. downplays and belittles the outcome of this “mini-sport.”

This inclination to equate sports with national pride permeates other parts of East Asia as well. In the late 1960s and early 70s, the Little League baseball championships won by the Red Leaf and other Taiwanese teams in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, boosted the beleaguered island’s national identity.

Professional baseball arose from the post-war rubble to restore Japan’s self-image. The 2002 World Cup semifinal appearance of host South Korea led to high expectations, though also a crushing defeat in Germany in 2006. Recently, Asian exports such as the Houston Rockets’ Yao Ming and the New York Yankees’ Wang Chien-ming have become celebrities on both sides of the Pacific, a transnational promise yet to be realized in reverse by American exports such as Michelle Kwan.

Translated back into English, however, “fu, fu, fu” sounds like the repetition of an expletive. Indeed, Beijing’s official jubilation concerning 888 results in the city’s underbelly, pardon the expression, getting “fucked up.” The Olympic hype spells the end(game) for Old Beijing, literally, as old *hutong* (alleys), *siheyuan* (single-storied courtyard houses), and other traditional infrastructure are preemptorily dug up to make way for (post)modernist sports venues and facilities of steel and fiberglass, including the National Stadium (“Bird’s Nest”), the National Aquatics Center (“Water Cube”), the CCTV headquarters (poised to broadcast the competition), and the giant egg of the National Grand Theater—all designed by Western architectural firms. Any aerial shot of the National Grand Theater adjacent to the Forbidden City confirms the jarring juxtaposition of the old and new, except the “old” here is deemed the everlasting, the forever young. The other Beijing, the “truly” old Beijing, does not show up in such aerial views; it needs to be excavated from below.

The opening date also signals how tightly controlled public discourse is over the Olympics. Mass media—newspapers, television, billboards, and public campaigns—strives to ensure a successful international event that brings nothing but joy. The effusive Olympics propaganda and advertising have saturated the public domain, so much so that a virtual net/work has been cast by the regime and big corporations. This net/work immerses you in images and sound bites, creating an experience similar to virtual reality. Physical constructions with mammoth cranes and tractors coincide with mental constructions of words and

events. One site for such propaganda is the *People's Daily Overseas Edition*, which has devoted a number of pages every week since at least 2006 to "Press for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad." The header for this weekly report is distinctly identified by the Beijing 2008 logo, called "Chinese Script, Dancing Beijing," which consists of the Chinese script for "jing" ("capital," as in Beijing) drawn as a runner with curved (apparently galloping) legs and open arms. The header also often includes a countdown to the opening day of the Olympics. The logo is an ingenious design, absorbing a sports event into the host city, the world into a single Chinese word. This sinologizing or nativizing of the Olympics is repeated in the editorial series entitled "under the five-ringed flag" (*wuhuan qixia*), the Olympic symbol remade to evoke Communist China's Five-Star Red Flag (*wuxing hongqi*). Contributors to *wuhuan qixia* include Hong Shen (Red Deep, a pen name loaded with Communist ideology). Indeed, all the articles and reports in the "Press for the Games" yoke together the Olympics with China—be it the Great Wall, folk art, ongoing city construction, military exercise, or emergency drills.

This overwhelming campaign to promote the Olympics recalls the Maoist tactics of brainwashing (*xiniao*) and thought reform (*sixiang gaizao*). Similar to those campaigns of a bygone era, the Olympics slogan, "One World One Dream," proves ultimately self-defeating, since there exist as many dreams and parallel universes as there are participants. Ideological conformity, traced back to Maoism, is uncannily complemented by its opposite—the Western import of pleasure-seeking modernity. The model for mass manufacturing of pleasure is, of course, Disney. European and Latin American critics have long critiqued Disneyland as the height of hyperreality. Umberto Eco bemoans that the absolute fake that pervades Disneyland and the American landscape has become the absolute real or hyperreal. Jean Baudrillard equates simulation with the hyperreal: simulation "is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal."²

Disneyfication, Chinese-style, has created a hyperreal Beijing, both in the cityscape and in virtual space, a discursive hyperbole inscribed architecturally and

A night view shows the National Aquatics Centre, also known as the "Water Cube," in Beijing on January 31, 2008. Photo credits: REUTERS/China Daily.



virtually. In fact, the facelift in virtual reality precedes the real, as countless cyber-tours present computer-generated images of Olympic venues long before their completion. But as various construction projects move past the exterior phase less than a year before the Olympics, actual exterior photographs never replace their virtual images.³ One wonders if they ever will, the rationale being, conceivably, that virtual images prove more conducive to cyber-visitors' fanciful flights. To illustrate, one notes that many images are night shots of phantom structures: structures yet to be completed. The two anchors of the Olympic Green, endearingly nicknamed the "Bird's Nest" and the "Water Cube," are prominently rendered as night scenes. Not only are they hyperreal representations, but hyperreal of a certain kind—the darkness of night creating a magical aura over the brightly-lit venues. Even in daytime shots, lighting bathes the buildings in a similar halo. Such manipulation is but the tip of the iceberg of a concerted sales pitch of 888 that disturbs even the designer of the "Bird's Nest." Designer Ai Weiwei, son of poet Ai Qing, castigated the showbiz surrounding the Olympics: "I hate the kind of feeling stirred up by promotion or propaganda . . . It's the kind of sentiment when you don't stick to the facts, but try to make up something, to mislead people away from a true discussion."⁴ Witnessing how his brainchild has been corrupted into "a shining symbol of China's march towards modernism," he calls it a "pretend smile."⁵ The misleading "pretend smile" is the hyperreal Beijing that has come to supplant the real. Ai Weiwei's comments are one of a chorus of other voices that have also criticized the demolition of the Old Beijing.⁶

The halo of hyperreality surrounding the Olympics and the capital city is symptomatic of the nation as a whole. This rush toward modernity that characterizes China's overall economic and technological development is borne out in the quintessential form of modern fantasy production: films, particularly those set exclusively or partly in Beijing. In recent years, fifth-generation filmmakers have manifested the modernizing/Westernizing drive, ironically, in their nostalgic revisiting of the martial arts genre. Soaring swordsmen come to resemble futuristic, sci-fi cyborgs, mythologizing a humanity in pursuit of, yet also bound

by, science and technology. Although swordsmen allegedly accomplish their feats via kung fu, a range of filmmaking technology—special effects, computer-generated fight sequences, even low-tech wirework—figures in the martial arts films of Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, and Feng Xiaogang. Indulging themselves in the hyperreal, these directors, joined by Tsui Hark from Hong Kong, occasionally give vent to the opposite impulse of representing the hyporeal—unpleasant reality meant to be repressed or forgotten, a term inspired by such pairings as hypertension and hypotension, hyperthermia and hypothermia. The dynamics of the two can be rather complex, exemplified by Feng Xiaogang's *Cell Phone* (2003), which links nostalgic, romanticized rural China to his stories of real people in real time Beijing. In *Cell Phone*, Feng shuttles between the protagonist's extramarital affairs and his roots in the countryside, the backward hyporeal that acquires a magical aura to heal urban malaise, and the hyporeality that modern China comes from and the nostalgic past that China ought to recapture *in spirit*.

The hyperreal seeks in principle to copy what alleges to be Western modernity. Yet Baudrillard has theorized that the original for the simulacrum no longer exists (or eventually disappears), which partly explains the fifth-generation filmmakers' ambivalence toward the Western model, alternately idolizing and dismissing it. For example, Zhang Yimou's corpus is marked by nothing short of schizophrenia. Pitted against his early, self-Orientalizing "red films"—*Red Sorghum* (1987), *Ju Dou* (1990), and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991)—are Zhang's semi-documentary, neorealist works of *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992), *Not One Less* (1999), and *Happy Times* (2001). As much as the red films exoticize the old China for the global cinema, his later works reverse to a realistic depiction of contemporary "little people."

Departing from their predecessors, many sixth-generation filmmakers devote their entire careers to the hyporeal—little people falling through the cracks of modernization and urbanization. Accordingly, Zhang Yang's *Shower* (1999) bemoans the vanishing of Old Beijing in the demolition of traditional *hutong*, communal bathhouses, and male bonding amidst modernization. Turning the camera from the dying

old to the emerging young, Wang Xiaoshuai in *Beijing Bicycle* (2001) zooms in on the “lost generation” of urban youth, cast adrift by rapid growth and the disintegration of family and neighborhood.

One recurring motif in these films intertwines the hyperreal with the hyporeal. Animated interludes and special effects are strewn almost incongruously across comedies and neorealist dramas, but such intrusion portends heightened fantasy tantamount to wish-

fulfillment. A case in point: animated characters in flight or in constant motion eerily link sensibilities as diverse as Feng Xiaogang’s tragicomedies and Jia Zhangke’s muted tragedies. The hyperreal is employed to create light comedy as well as to assuage (futilely of course) the yearning for freedom from the hyporeal, such as migrant laborers in the city. In *Big Shot’s Funeral* (2001), characters are treated to an animated dramatization of the “comedy funeral” for the American film director in a coma at the Beijing hospital. The

A Portrait of Waiting

By Joy Chia

A review of *Still Life* (2006)

Directed by Jia Zhangke

Running Time: 108 minutes

(Mandarin with English subtitles)

Still Life chronicles the experiences of ordinary people whose lives have been overturned by the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. Lush cinematic shots of the region’s mountains, which occupy a central place in the Chinese poetic canon, are juxtaposed with the prosaic act of taking cities and lives apart in the name of “progress.”

Set in what is left of the town of Fengjie, 150 miles upstream from the Three Gorges Dam, the movie ostensibly tells the story of two people searching for their respective spouses. Yet, the movie is more a showcase for the suspension of time and the act of waiting. Fengjie is in the middle of self-deconstruction as its deserted buildings await the rising waters. Only the old, those too tired to move, and migrant workers—employed to demolish the buildings by hand—are left.

Construction for the Three Gorges Dam started in 1994 and is slated for completion in 2011. At an official cost of US \$25 billion (but probably more), the dam is expected to be the world’s largest hydro-electric power station, and is harkened to be an extraordinary engineering feat. In the wake of this achievement, however, is the reality that construction

has caused the relocation of more than 2.3 million people and is expected to affect four million more. The environmental effects of the dam have been called catastrophic, while historical and archeologically-important sites are being submerged underwater. Stark scenes of this destruction are presented clinically in *Still Life* as construction workers mark the expected height of the waters onto the side of the buildings. The expressionless faces of the workers, most of whom are migrants with no emotional connection to the place they are marking for destruction, are sharply contrasted with the emotional reaction of those whose lives are tied up in the age-old villages. A main character, Han Sanming, seeking to return to a street where his wife and child lived, is taken to the riverbank and shown that the entire neighborhood now sits underwater.

Still Life was the surprise winner of the Golden Lion Award for Best Film at the 2006 Venice Film Festival, and has been shown to critical acclaim. From the opening scene panning across the deck of a ferry with the region’s majestic mountains as backdrop, through the ending shot of a man walking a tightrope between two abandoned buildings, *Still Life* uses human bodies as often as landscape to populate its cinematic tableaux. Part of its allure is that Jia Zhangke empathetically captures how the characters are immobile in their waiting, yet constantly transient without much direction. The movie is difficult to get through, however, since it is a lengthy film in which the viewer does just as much waiting as the characters.

reincarnated filmmaker is a baby flying over the city, with his race or skin color being revised along with the ongoing discussion. Feng's wit and satirical sensibility ensure that the film beyond this animated episode retains this fantastical quality.

While Feng permeates his films with a cartoon-like fancy, Jia Zhangke, with his opposite temperament, contrasts the animated hyperreal with the live action hyporeal. Even the poster for Jia's *The World* (2004) illustrates this discord. Perhaps one rung above Beijing's migrant laborers from her home province of Shanxi, the female protagonist Xiao Tao is a performer at a theme park in the outskirts of Beijing. The poster features her anxiously looking down at her cell phone, trying in vain to reach her boyfriend, who is enamored with someone else. What is striking is that Xiao Tao is wearing a Japanese kimono and hairdo for one of her roles, against a backdrop of cartoon drawings of the various sights at the theme park: mock-ups of the Eiffel Tower, the Pyramids, the Sphinx, and the Tower of Pisa. Cartoon imitations of imitations in plaster and concrete, the poster shows images twice removed from the reality of such tourist attractions. She is floating above it all in a flight attendant's uniform, an imaginary exit from her worries. The very existence of the Disneyland-styled theme park modeled after famous sights around the world highlights Chinese visitors' escapist angst. Jia manages to vest every single frame of *The World* with the quiet desperation of a hyperreal society. The opening credits conclude with an old garbage collector standing in the foreground against the park's Eiffel Tower, silhouetted in a smog-filled dawn. The garbage man belongs to the hyporeal—waste matter expelled by the hyperreal in the background, a spiritual wasteland. This tableau is preceded by a jerky hand-held camera sequence through a frenzied backstage preparing for the next show. The camera turns out to be trailing Xiao Tao's shrill voice asking if anyone has a band-aid, apparently for her bruised heels. The show must go on despite her pain because the theme park offers, shall we say, a band-aid for the soul (or soul-less). As the show opens with haunting electronic music, all backstage chaos and individual agony are glossed over on the glitzy dance stage.

Moving through a gallery of the hyporeal—a migrant

construction worker crushed to death, a theme park guard who steals, a dancer-turned-manager through her intimacy with the troupe director, and Xiao Tao's Russian friend Anna who becomes a call girl—the film closes without any closure. After a falling out, Xiao Tao and her boyfriend, Taisheng, spend a night together at a friend's dormitory. Whether reconciled or committing a double suicide, they are found poisoned from a gas leak, a common accident in the freezing city in winter. As their bodies are laid side by side in the light snow, the film slowly fades out, with a voice-over in their Shanxi accent laced with drowsiness, either from sleep or from thickening carbon monoxide:

Taisheng: Are we dead yet?

Xiao Tao: No. We have just begun.

This suggests that their thwarted love is to blossom, magically, in afterlife. With these last words, Jia appends what approximates a dream sequence to the tragedy of the hyporeal, as if, to defy the tyranny of neorealist filmmaking, Jia himself seeks to, like Huck Finn, light out for the hyperreal to flee the hyporeality that dooms his characters.

Jia's next feature, *Still Life*, traces two hyporeal protagonists in slow and painful searches for their spouses amidst construction of the Yangtze River's Three Gorges Dam. The construction has totally devastated residents along the river, their houses demolished and whole villages submerged in rising water. Although devoid of any animated element, Jia continues to inject wish-fulfilling touches as one of the protagonists witnesses a ball of light—a UFO—descending into the mountain ranges near the river. Subsequently, a bizarre postmodernist tower, presumably the UFO, blasts off from what is left of this pastoral scene. Totally out of place in neorealist films, these moments bear out the shock and resentment over invasive modernity, be it the miniature replica of the Eiffel Tower outside Beijing, the futuristic UFO over the Three Gorges Dam, or anywhere else in hyperreal China.

Echoing these filmic narratives, the yoking of the hyperreal of "prosper" and the hyporeal of "fucked" is bound to manifest itself in the 2008 Olympics. The representation of this spectacle has already begun to

dangle between Chinese nationalism and Western defensiveness, somewhat xenophobic extremes. Amidst the Chinese hoopla on August 8, 2007, marking the year-long countdown to the Olympics, the 2001 Pulitzer Prize winner Ann Telnaes published an editorial cartoon in newspaper syndicates across the U.S. Telnaes' cartoon shows a Beijing Olympics reviewing stand where Hitler-like figures, complete with communist five-star armbands and Hitler moustaches, raise their arms in the Nazi salute, a volatile merger of Beijing and 1936 Berlin. Other editorial cartoonists published in the same month works satirizing Chinese exports. Steve Breen of the *San Diego Union-Tribune* punned on the word "junk" for Chinese flat-bottomed boats of old and present-day shoddy products on cargo ships. Mike Luckovich of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* drew a spread-eagled Santa Clause, apparently killed by lead poisoning, surrounded by Chinese-made toys. This war of words, from editorial China cartoons to recalls of "Made in China" products to Chinese retaliation, seems to preview contestation not only in track and field but also in the field of representation. What happens to the hyperreal Beijing, once the 2008 Olympics has

come and gone? This may be a moot question, now that the shadow is the city.

Notes

1. "Zhang Yimou and his 'Five-Tiger Generals,'" *People's Daily*, August 25, 2007.
2. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila F. Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1.
3. One exception is a series of progress photographs chronicling the rise of the "Bird's Nest" out of the "yellow earth" of northern China.
4. "Artist behind Beijing's 'bird's nest' stadium boycotts Olympics," CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Company), August 11, 2007, www.cbc.ca/arts/artdesign/story/2007/08/11/beijing-artist-stadium.html.
5. "Artist behind Beijing's 'bird's nest' stadium boycotts Olympics," CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Company), August 11, 2007, www.cbc.ca/arts/artdesign/story/2007/08/11/beijing-artist-stadium.html.
6. The Taiwanese writer Lung Yingtai criticizes the construction of Olympic venues across Beijing as an exorbitant, vainglorious effort. See "Gazing at an ancient capital's metamorphosis" [注视一个古都的蜕变], *World Journal*, July 27, 2006, A12.

HRIC Launches *Challenging China* in New York and Hong Kong

***Challenging China: Struggle and Hope
in an Era of Change***

Edited by Sharon Hom and Stacy Mosher

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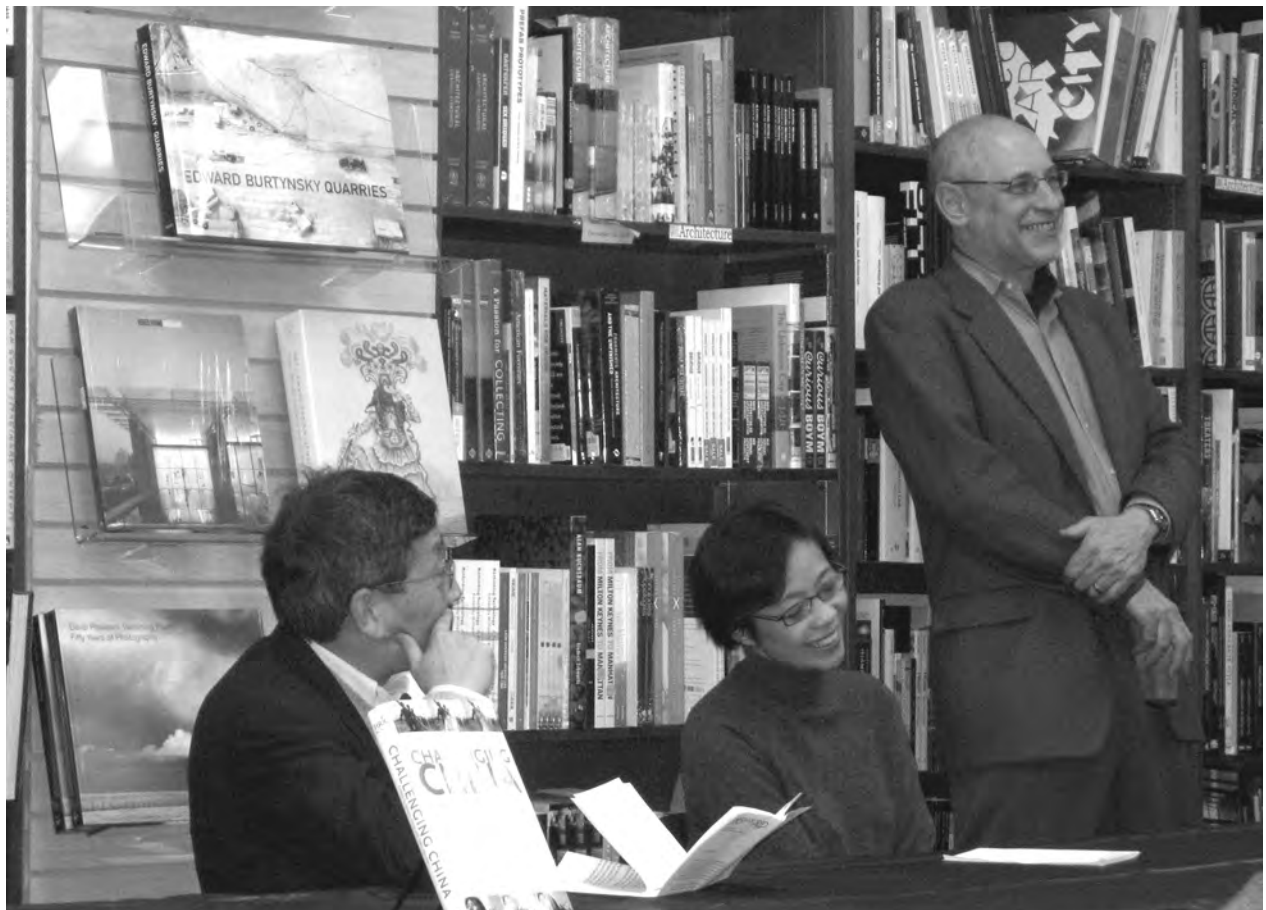
On December 4, 2007, Andy Nathan, HRIC Board Co-chair, Hu Ping, Board member and editor of *Beijing Spring*, and Executive Director Sharon Hom hosted a lively discussion with the public about the book at **Book Culture**, a New York bookstore. Additionally, on December 11, Sharon introduced the book at the **Hong Kong Foreign Correspondents' Club** along with Yan Li, whose poetry appears in the book and also in this issue of *China Rights Forum*.

REMARKS BY HU PING Book Culture, New York

China is increasingly drawing the world's attention. It is fair to say that in the next couple of decades, the problem of China will become the most important problem. Because China is a large country and its population is one-fifth of the world's total, and because we live in an age of globalization, our lives are like those in a tiny global village. China's problems will not only be China's problems. Rather, its problems will be the world's problems.

The 27 essays in the collection, *Challenging China: Struggle and Hope in an Era of Change*, paint a portrait of modern-day China from many different angles, and reveal a system in which human rights have come under severe attack. In order to win the right to host the 2008 Olympics, the Chinese government made promises to improve the human rights situation, but has thus far failed to honor these commitments. The

Hu Ping, Sharon Hom, and Andy Nathan discuss *Challenging China* at Book Culture in New York City on December 4.



human rights situation in China has not improved; rather, it has worsened. To stage what they consider a successful Olympics in 2008, the government has presented an image of China as a flourishing land of peace and prosperity, void of any protests or dissenting voices. It has led those outside of China to overlook its problems, including, but not limited to, its human rights problems. When the government says that it must “clean up” possible hitches ahead of the Olympics, it not only represses dissidents and other human rights activists, but also drives away large numbers of migrant workers, because these people damage the pristine image that the government would like to preserve. The government sees this kind of persecution as an important part of its preparations for 2008.

Generally speaking, the staging of the Olympics in an autocratic country can result in two very different scenarios: it can lead to the promotion of human rights improvements in the host country or it can lead to a regression in its human rights situation. Unfortunately, the facts so far indicate that China is heading in the latter direction.

Next year, millions of visitors from around the world will surge towards China for the Beijing Olympics. What will they encounter? What kind of picture of China will they leave with? It is easy to imagine that a huge number of people will be astounded by China’s economic prosperity, and experience the warmth and goodwill of the Chinese people. But due to the Chinese government’s diligence in glossing over problems, many will miss the opportunity to see the dark side of Chinese society. Perhaps there will be some who do notice the widening economic disparity and the infringement of human rights. They may be confused, and find themselves unable to make sense of this, unsure of how to interpret and reconcile such conflicting images of China. And then there may be some who optimistically believe that as long as China continues on its current trajectory of reform, these problems will inevitably be mitigated, if not solved. Still others may believe in the culturally relativistic argument that Chinese people have their own standards for human rights, and that we should not hold China up to Western norms. To these arguments, I must respond.

First of all, I firmly believe that human rights standards are universal, with no distinction between China’s and the West’s. The reasoning is simple: like Westerners, Chinese people do not like to be told that they cannot criticize or dissent against the government. Like Westerners, Chinese people are not willing to be imprisoned or massacred for expressing opposition to the government. And like Westerners, Chinese people do not wish to have their right to a fair and open trial stripped away, or to be deprived of their right to defend themselves, when the government arrests and interrogates them.

When we speak of the widening gap between the rich and poor in China today, what I want to strongly emphasize is that not only is the gap very large, but the character of the problem is particularly malevolent. China’s economic disparity problem is a unique one: it was not created by history or by market forces, but by autocratic rule. In China, the reason why the poor live in poverty is because their possessions have been seized by those in power; the rich live in wealth because they are able to use their influence to snatch away the things that others have produced. Most people look at the Chinese economy and only see the breakneck speeds at which it has developed. Indeed, when compared to Russia and other former Communist countries in Eastern Europe, China’s economic reform appears superior. But the problem is, no matter how many difficulties Russia and the former Soviet countries have encountered in their economic reform and development, these difficulties at least occurred within systems of public supervision and democratic participation. In those countries, citizens have the right to express themselves and the right to vote, which gives their reforms a certain kind of basic legitimacy.

The Party used the name of reform to turn the whole people’s public property into the private property of its own members. After that, it stole in the name of revolution, then divided the spoils in the name of reform.

China’s situation is exactly the opposite. No matter

how many dizzying accomplishments that China's reforms seem to achieve, because they take place in a system that lacks public supervision and democratic participation, it all inevitably leads to the plundering of the masses' property by the rich and powerful. On one hand, in the past decade the Communist Party has continually used its power to appropriate the wealth created by its citizens for itself. On the other hand, it has forced the detrimental consequences of its economic growth onto the backs of its citizens. First, the Party used the name of revolution to transform the common people's private property into the public property of the "whole people." Then it used the name of reform to turn the whole people's public property into the private property of its own members. After that, it stole in the name of revolution, then divided the spoils in the name of reform. Yet these two opposite crimes were both committed in the space of 50 years by the same Party. This kind of reform bears no legitimacy whatsoever. Therefore, the twisted pattern of wealth distribution that it has spawned cannot be recognized or accepted by the people.

Ten years ago, China's *Reading* magazine published a short essay, which cited an old peasant of Shanxi. This old peasant had mentioned Deng Xiaoping's "Letting Some People Become Rich First" policy, saying, "Before the liberation in 1949, my village had one landlord and two rich peasants, and this was already considered as 'letting some people become rich first.'" If things were going to turn out like this, why bother in the first place? Last year, a worker who had just been laid off wrote on a blog: "The planned economy definitely needs reform, and in order to have reform, a price must be paid. But the planned economy was not an invention of us workers, but of you, the Communist Party. So why is it that the workers and not the Communist Party are paying the price? Why do you force us into unemployment, while you transform yourselves into capitalists?"

The Chinese authorities know very well that their so-called "Chinese model" is built upon an unfair, illegitimate foundation that goes against both human rights and democracy. This is why they stubbornly insist on maintaining a one-party system and severe political restrictions on the people. They worry that if they relax

their political grip for even one moment, economic justice, or a settling of accounts in the economy, will swell into a wave that is too great for them to withstand. True, Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao have declared their concern for the weak and the powerless, and have implemented some measures to alleviate the problem of economic disparity. But these are no more than ploys of "moderate repression," ultimately aimed at maintaining a viable, continuous system of exploitation.

The Chinese authorities say they truly hope that given another few decades of peace and stability, they can improve China's development even more. What they mean is that they hope to continue the system of reform and development under an autocracy, on one hand buying time to "cleanse" ill-gotten "black money" (that is, bribes), on the other hand mitigating the gap between the rich and the poor somewhat. What we can be certain of is this: a superpower that is built on such criminal methods will only become an increasingly self-confident, overbearing, and powerful autocratic regime. Such a regime will inevitably pose a great threat to the freedom and peace of all mankind. For those of us who cherish our freedom and peace, this is not something to be treated lightly.

Translated by Victoria Kwan

REMARKS BY SHARON HOM **Foreign Correspondents' Club, Hong Kong**

This week marks International Human Rights Day, this year commemorates the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and next year China hosts the 2008 Beijing Olympics—making it a good time to reflect on human rights challenges, commit to redoubling our efforts, and look ahead for opportunities to leverage reform. *Challenging China: Struggle and Hope in an Era of Change* is a collection of translated essays, articles, poetry, and reflections by Chinese intellectuals, writers, journalists, and activists. It provides windows into the lives of migrants, young women forced into prostitution, the impact of HIV/AIDS and health pandemics on poor villagers, the lingering effects of exile from one's homeland, the burdens of history, and the enforced

amnesia for massive past abuses like the Cultural Revolution or the June 4th crackdown. *Challenging China* provides insights into the reality for the vast majority of China's people living behind the gleaming facades, now so carefully packaged for the Olympics.

Most of the collection features pieces that originally appeared in *China Rights Forum*. Collectively, these voices are a powerful testament to the ongoing human rights abuses and human costs; at the same time, they represent the diversity of perspectives, critiques, and demands for accountability and justice that cannot be censored or silenced by the authorities. These are the challenges from China's own people that the regime will have to address.

The book's final section, *The Shepherd's Song*, opens with one of my favorite Yan Li poems, "Give It Back to Me" (还给我), and suggests the possibility of healing and spiritual reclaiming, and the ways that individuals can choose to heal themselves and their communities.

Each question invokes a powerful resonance in a Chinese register, reflecting the realities behind the dominant story of modernity and progress, defined by Shanghai style and double-digit economic growth.

The Être exhibition "The Face of Human Rights" at the Fringe Club next door poses a series of questions that are at the heart of the human rights challenges facing China and the world. Each question invokes a powerful resonance in a Chinese register, reflecting the realities behind the dominant story of modernity and progress, defined by Shanghai style and double-digit economic growth. "What is the value of a human life?" This question should remind us that China ranks highest in the world in executions. "How can they say I am different just because of the color of my skin?" This one brings to mind those discriminated against thanks to the rigidity of the *hukou* system or discrimination against ethnic minorities. "Nowhere to run, no place to hide?" Despite international rights granted to refugees and displaced persons, in China these rights

are limited and bleed into the rights of religious belief and right to life. For North Korean refugees seeking out China, there is no entry; for Tibetans, seeking to preserve the integrity and survival of their culture and religion, there is no exit, as was starkly demonstrated before the eyes of the world with the shooting at the Nangpa La Pass in September 2006.

Other questions regarding rights to food, health, and housing: "Why is half the planet hungry?" "Must a woman's life in some African countries be so much shorter than in Western Europe?" "Is it human to live in a cardboard box?" "Is it possible to be free and equal without education?" Chinese have witnessed the collapse of a basic social safety network: 600-700 million rural inhabitants have no access to primary health care, migrant children have limited access to education, and massive numbers of people are displaced as a result of Olympics venue construction. "Human capital or human beings?" Workers used and discarded. Hundreds of millions of workers are displaced from state owned enterprises, many working in dangerous mines or factories and risking their health, limbs, and lives, or robbed of their hard-won wages.

"Why should we be allowed to have secrets?" The flip side of right of expression and access to information is the right to privacy, yet in China it is the government that has all the privacy under the state secrets system, whereby anything and everything can be swept into an all-inclusive net with retroactivity provisions, marked by a lack of transparency and accountability.

"What are we supposed to believe in?" The freedom of thought and belief is ignored and persecution continues of non-state sanctioned religious practitioners and groups. Meanwhile ethnic minority groups asserting their cultural identity and religious belief are labeled as terrorists and separatists.

Should the word "free" only be allowed in such statements as "This dog is free from lice"? What about freedom of expression? I don't need to tell you here in Hong Kong that the Chinese government is an authoritarian regime with zero tolerance for critical voices and different views. Hong Kong still presents the hope of a democracy front flowing from the south. In con-

trast, Beijing is building a state-of-the-art technical system of censorship, surveillance, and control, and the security apparatus being put in place for the Olympics raises serious issues of privacy and the enhanced repressive capacity of the state after 2008.

In George Orwell's *1984*, Winston Smith wonders to himself, "how does one man assert his power over another?" "By making him suffer," he responds. An affront to the rights to a fair trial and prohibition of torture, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture concluded from his mission to China that torture remained endemic and he noted a palpable climate of fear. Rights defenders, lawyers, petitioners, and activists are regularly subjected to violence, denial of basic procedural rights in politicized prosecutions (such as access to their lawyer), and subjected to torture in prison and detention. In November 2008, China's report on the Convention Against Torture will be reviewed at the UN, but that occurs after the international media has packed up its cameras and headed home after the Olympics. Events like these demand close media attention.

How China addresses these human rights challenges has profound domestic, regional, and international

impacts. Because China has one-fifth of the world's population, and due to the interrelated impacts of globalization, especially concerning the environment, China's problems are the world's problems. China's rules of engagement are powerful: the threat or promise of access to markets, information, and domestic groups is powerful. The trade-offs and costs, including self-censorship, fear, and accepting the convenient half-truths of the China success story, need to be more publicly and collectively addressed and confronted.

We should keep in mind the words of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour, that the core values enshrined in the UDHR of inherent dignity, justice, non-discrimination, equality, and fairness "apply to everyone, everywhere, always." In advancing human rights, we must aim for the promise at the heart of the UDHR: fulfillment of human potential. Poets, artists, writers, and cultural workers—like Yan Li—remind us of the reasons we struggle for human rights. They remind us of our potential for creating beauty and hope and they remind us how important it is to keep alive and nourish the human spirit and to honor the stewardship that we have been given of this frail planet.

Courageous Fighter

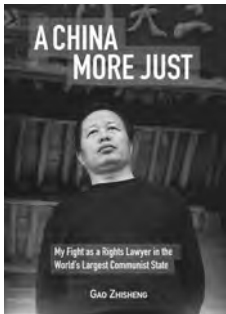
By Kerry Brown

A review of *A China More Just: My Fight as a Rights Lawyer in the World's Largest Communist State*

By Gao Zhisheng

Broad Press USA, 2007

255 pages, US\$14.95



China has received reasonably positive press over the last few years. Part of this is due to the energy and focus that the Chinese government, and its officials and diplomats, have given to soft diplomacy campaigns. Soft diplomacy has in turn been

backed up by generous amounts of aid to and investment in the developing world. China is keen to make friends.

This approach is likely to intensify in the build up to the Beijing Olympics. China will want to extract every ounce of goodwill and positive news coverage it can from the Games. Thus, in its reaction to the resignation of Steven Spielberg as an artistic advisor for the opening and closing ceremonies, China was both defensive and irritated. This demonstrates that reminders of the other China—the hidden China, or, to be more accurate, the dark side of modern China—are not welcome, at least by the central government.

Self-trained lawyer Gao Zhisheng's account comes from this "other China." His is a tale of a Communist Party member who came from the poorest groups of Chinese society. He lost his father as a child and was dependent on the work of his mother, growing up in the hinterland of China in the 1960s and 70s in the midst of widespread poverty and deprivation. But Gao, through hard work and dedication, was to enjoy at least some education, and during a period of work in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, discovered a talent for law. He qualified as a lawyer in the 1990s, and started practicing on some of the most difficult, sensitive cases. His inspiration, originally, was the sight of injustices perpetrated in the work place where he was based in his

early career. This exposure motivated him to empower himself through the study of law, and to become active in cases that he felt involved exploitation of others. For this his reward has been harassment by agents of the state, and, most recently, imprisonment. His current whereabouts and situation remain unclear.

A China More Just consists of autobiographical writings, letters, and diary entries. An additional piece is written by Gao's wife. Gao describes how he came to be interested in law, how he gained qualifications, and what drew him to the difficult cases he has taken on. In the past, Gao has defended Falun Gong practitioners, those harassed or imprisoned by the state for property repossession disputes, and individuals like the blind activist Chen Guangcheng, who is currently imprisoned on trumped-up charges for criticizing forced abortions. In one case in Liaoning Province, Gao dealt with Falun Gong believers who had been severely beaten and detained without due legal process, and received a beating himself for getting involved. He has also taken up cases in both Beijing and provincial China involving people whose property was taken from them without proper compensation. As Gao points out, China's legal system sets out clear rules in all of these cases. These rules were simply not followed by the so-called officers of the state in specific regions.

Arbitrary arrest, perverse decisions, lack of transparency, and blatantly political decisions all seem par for the course in Gao's description of the underbelly of modern China.

As a result of Gao's activities, as many as 70 security police have been posted outside his apartment in Beijing, and he has been followed by cars and army vehicles, one of which almost killed him. His friends and associates have been intimidated and his legal practice shut down. Gao's description of this sort of intimidation and psychological pressure—including one attempt in Beijing to run his car off the road—is particularly disturbing. As has happened so often in the past, the agents of the darker reaches of the state have proved adept at isolating their targets and making them feel

vulnerable. Since last year, Gao has been in permanent detention.

Gao's fundamental point is surely right: until China has a credible rule of law, and Chinese citizens have better access to justice—and, for that matter, confidence that the security apparatus of the state won't be turned against them—it is hard to take seriously China's claims to be a modern, developing society. Arbitrary arrest, perverse decisions, lack of transparency, and blatantly political decisions all seem par for the course in Gao's description of the underbelly of modern China. Despite China's modernization, the bottom line in 2008 is that when there is a conflict between the political power of the Communist Party and China's legal system, the Party always wins.

It is important, therefore, to read the sobering reminders of books like these. China has come a long way in the last three decades. No one disputes its economic success. A middle class is thriving and its members are increasingly flexing their muscles. In last year's National Party Congress, China's leaders clearly mentioned the "importance of people's welfare," and the need for the Party to serve society. Chinese people enjoy freedoms they never imagined in the grim Maoist period before 1976, and increasing numbers are suing the government over grievances ranging from environmental pollution to miscarriages of justice. But there are still creaking contradictions in this system. All too often, the strong—largely those in the Communist Party—are able to ride roughshod over the rights



Lawyer Gao Zhisheng with his family before he was detained. Courtesy of Broad Press USA.

of the weak. This book gives first hand descriptions of that. It is written from the unique perspective of a person trying to change China from the inside out, rather than the other way around. And Gao's account of the punishments meted out to practitioners of Falun Gong, whatever one might think of their beliefs or practices, offers plenty of food for thought for those trying to make sense of the new, bold China put on display.

As Gao himself makes clear, he is intensely proud of his country, and of its culture and history. In his view, however, China will only really stand up, as Mao Zedong promised in 1949, when it becomes a country where the law is respected above politics.