

# 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.<sup>1</sup> 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."<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup> Witnessing how his brainchild has been corrupted into "a shining symbol of China's march towards modernism," he calls it a "pretend smile."<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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](http://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](http://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.