

China's 'CivilOlympic' Performances and (Re)Gained Global Visibility Fantasising about a New Brand China through Olympic Public Service Announcements

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Abstract This article investigates how China fantasised about itself and the Beijing 2008 Olympics through the award-winning TV public service announcements (PSAs) of the *Beijing Opera Series*, with a focus on visibility. By drawing on theories of the spectacle, I perform a semiotic analysis of the most recurrent signs, organising them according to the main themes that emerge. The theatre stage – which represents the Olympic stage – is closely linked to China's dream of owning the Games and its desire for global visibility. The performance includes the theatrical performance of the Beijing Opera and the performance of civilisation, which semiotically over-determines the Games. The protagonists include famous actors and roles of Beijing Opera (i.e. Dan, who is an anthropomorphic metaphor for China), as well as ordinary people, who are *extraordinary* for their high degree of civilisation. The spectators, especially through the intradiegetic presence of a Western male Other, validate the country's performative success and confirm its achieved global visibility.

Keywords Beijing 2008. Brand China. China's national image. Civilisation. Public service advertising. Olympic spectacle. Global visibility.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Beijing 2008 Olympics, Brand China and Televised Public Service Advertising. – 3 A PSA Campaign to Serve the Beijing 2008 Olympics. – 4 Theoretical and Methodological Approach. – 4.1 Synopses. – 4.2 Analysis. – 5 Conclusions.



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1 Introduction

The Olympic Games are increasingly understood as an indispensable vehicle for country branding (Panagiotopoulou 2011; Sun, Paswan 2012), defined as “a way to help a nation articulate a more coherent and cohesive national identity, to animate the spirit of its citizens in the service of national priorities, and to maintain loyalty to the territory within its borders” (Aronczyk 2013, 3). Hosting the Olympics, therefore, is of crucial importance for every country wishing to promote its brand on the international stage.

China was no exception. Compared to the previous iterations of the Games, the Beijing 2008 Olympics had even heavier economic and political connotations and implications (Brownell 2008; Price, Dayan 2008; Xu 2008). As the country was increasingly coming under the spotlight of global attention, the domestic media were responsible for producing the official Olympic narrative, which had to portray China as prosperous and powerful, but also as politically stable, capable of obtaining international respectability and globalised (DeLisle 2008).

Ultimately, the worldwide live broadcast of the Beijing 2008 Olympics was a success: with 4.7 billion TV viewers, it attracted the largest global audience ever (Nielsen.com 2008). In academic terms, this led to a considerable body of work that studied the Olympic Games as a ‘spectacle’, which was originally theorised by the French Situationist Debord to refer to the “social relationship between people that is mediated by images” ([1967] 1977, 12). This concept was further extended to include all the “media constructs that are out of the ordinary and outside habitual daily routine”, which “involve an aesthetic dimension and are often dramatic” (Kellner 2010, 76). These scholarly contributions considered the Chinese Olympics as a spectacle aimed at enhancing the country’s national image worldwide (Caffrey 2011; Luo, Richeri 2012), and focused on the most significant televised moment in China’s Olympic story to the world: the opening ceremony (Barmé 2009; Chen, Colapinto, Luo 2012). Nonetheless, although the Olympics are unanimously considered to be “a spectacle par excellence” and “irreducibly visual” (MacAloon 1984, 245), the performative and (audio)visual nature of the media representations related to China’s national image – or “Brand China” (Ramo 2007) – in the pre-Olympic period is barely addressed in the existing literature, especially when it comes to a critical in-depth reading of the media texts targeting the domestic audience.

This article posits that, as it was precisely the approach of the 2008 Olympics that rendered the improvement of China’s brand image on the global stage more urgent than ever, the country intended to exploit this opportunity to attract the world’s attention. I argue that this priority influenced the way the country imagined its national identity and represented itself in media texts – first and foremost

in terms of visibility. This paper innovatively contributes to our understanding of China's self-representation in the (pre)Olympic period, by investigating how China fantasised about its national image by looking at one of the key tools through which the country narrated the 'China story' to itself, and focusing on the scarcely considered yet privileged site for the manufacture of State-sanctioned media texts: Olympic public service announcements or PSAs (*Aoyun gongyi guanggao* 奥运公益广告).

Firstly, this article illustrates the PSA campaign *Welcome the Olympics, Be Civilised, Set New Trends* (*Ying Aoyun, jiang wenming, shu xinfeng* 迎奥运, 讲文明, 树新风), and explains its rationale and implementation in the context of China's Olympic internal propaganda. Secondly, it provides an overview of the themes and styles of the TV PSAs of the aforementioned campaign and national competition and introduces the theoretical and methodological approach. I then undertake a semiotic analysis of the three TV PSAs of the *Beijing Opera Series* (*Jingju xilie* 京剧系列), which is organised around the main themes emerging from the most significant words, images and sounds, unveiling their sociocultural meanings and connotations, as well as explaining their significance in the light of the official representational priorities of Beijing 2008. Lastly, I discuss the findings and present my conclusions.

2 Beijing 2008 Olympics, Brand China and Televised Public Service Advertising

As insightfully predicted by Wang (2008), the Beijing 2008 Olympics constituted a "defining moment for 'Brand China'" (239), and not only in commercial terms. The Games were also characterised by internal propaganda and mobilisation on a scale unseen in China since the beginning of Deng's reform era (DeLisle 2008). As a result, a number of studies explored the vast Olympic education campaign that targeted the domestic audience in order to create and promote positive narratives of a 'new' China.

Brady (2009) revealed that the Olympic internal propaganda was aimed at gaining consensus for the Party and building national pride, and also had the objective of educating on Chinese values, showcasing the government's achievements and focusing on inclusiveness and participation. Brownell (2009) examined the Olympic education programme in schools and argued that the Olympics helped China to imagine a future where the country would be more integrated into the international community. De Kloet, Chong and Landsberger (2010) analysed the propaganda posters and training manuals for the Olympic volunteers. They identified three discourses linked to China's imagined national identity: a civilised China; a safe Chi-

na; and a harmonious society. Chong (2017) examined the creation of new model citizens by analysing the posters of the Olympic volunteer programme, which used emotional slogans and positive images of China. Broudehoux (2012) investigated the Olympic civilisation discourse that merged Beijing's official propaganda with notions of a harmonious society and spiritual civilisation.

Surprisingly, although public service announcements (hereafter PSAs, *gongyi guanggao* 公益广告) played a crucial role in promoting both the Olympic civilisation campaign and the volunteering programme, as it will be revealed below, the studies above did not even mention them. This omission seems to reflect the scant attention that has been dedicated to PSAs in Olympic Studies more generally. By focusing on selected textbooks, volunteer posters and manuals, the scholarly contributions above seem to suggest that the Olympic campaigning was just another example of blunt, old-fashioned propaganda. This is due to the fact that they failed to take into account previous academic findings that demonstrate how China's new propaganda actually started to employ language and styles that are less artificial, in addition to adopting modern techniques typical of commercial advertising precisely through PSAs (Barmé 1999; Brady 2008; Cheng, Chan 2009).

In the last decade, PSAs have started to play an unprecedented role in the discursive construction of China's national image (Liu, He 2014). In particular, the subgenre of Olympic PSAs became so ubiquitous that it was even praised for having initiated a new decade in the history of Chinese PSAs (Luo 2008). As a result, a number of scholars investigated specific case studies of Olympic PSAs, most of which were televised (Shi 2008; Chen 2008; Puppini 2011).

Only a few English-language academic investigations acknowledged the specific role played by TV PSAs in Olympic campaigning. Landsberger (2009) observed the extensive use of celebrity endorsements, which was aimed at portraying China in a favourable way, as well as showing people the desired behaviour to adopt. His study illustrates a number of strategies employed by Chinese PSAs but does not provide a close reading of selected case studies. Yu (2011) investigated an educational commercial by China Central Television (CCTV) and performed a cognitive semantic analysis of the central multimodal metaphor: "Hosting the Beijing Olympics is performing Beijing Opera on an international stage" (597). His study is the closest to this article, insofar as he focuses on a PSA that I also examine; nonetheless, it is very different in terms of methodology and scope, as it fails to address the (self)representational strategies and the increasing visibility of Brand China, which are actually intrinsic to this PSA.

The original contribution of this article is at least threefold: firstly, it looks at Olympic PSAs, which so far have been neglected both in Chinese Studies and Olympic Studies, as significant tools for repre-

senting and promoting a country's image; secondly, it offers a close reading of selected Chinese-language PSAs, of which only one has been explored in the existing English-language literature, after contextualising them within the Olympic campaign; finally, it investigates the performative and (audio)visual nature of these media texts with a focus on visibility and the relationship with country branding, which is a significant yet still under-investigated area.

3 A PSA Campaign to Serve the Beijing 2008 Olympics

The best example of PSAs used in the Beijing 2008 Olympics is the PSA campaign *Welcome the Olympics, Be Civilised, Set New Trends* (*Ying Aoyun, jiang wenming, shu xinfeng* 迎奥运, 讲文明, 树新风, hereafter WBS), which was promoted with the 500-day countdown to the opening ceremony, on 27 March 2007 (Wenming.cn 2009a). WBS was homonymous with a big internal propaganda campaign launched in 2006 by the Central Guidance Committee on Socialist Spiritual Civilisation Construction (CGCSSCC), of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCCPC) and the Beijing Organising Committee of the XXIX Olympiad (BOCOG), whose aim was to improve the 'quality' (*suzhi* 素质) and degree of civilisation of the population, in order to establish a positive and harmonious social environment. Together with the volunteering programme and the etiquette competition, WBS was one of the main initiatives that ensured the success of the internal propaganda campaign (Gov.cn 2008).

WBS was preceded by the emission of the "Notice on the Launch of the National PSA Competition 'Welcome the Olympics, Be Civilised, Set New Trends'" (hereafter Notice), which was issued jointly on 22 March 2007 by the Publicity Department, the CGCSSCC, the State Administration of Industry and Commerce (SAIC), the State Administration for Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP), and the BOCOG. The Notice was directed to the authorities at different administrative levels and specified that WBS had to "promote the crucial role of PSAs in the diffusion of the Olympic spirit and in the guidance of new social trends" (Wenming.cn 2007).

On 3 September 2008, all the PSA entries were broadcast by domestic media, appeared on public transport, and were voted online. A jury of experts selected 88 best adworks (23 audiovisual, 45 radio, 20 print), and honoured them with awards (gold, silver and bronze); moreover, 21 advanced work units and 5 advanced media - CCTV, Guangming Daily, People's Radio, People's Daily, Economic Daily - were given honorary mentions (Wenming.cn 2009b). WBS was highly eulogised by the Chinese media and advertising magazines, as it hit historical records for number of PSAs submitted to the com-

petition (1,174 adworks received) (Wenming.cn 2009a) but also for professionals involved, economic investment, media participation, length and frequency of broadcast and advertising value (Luo 2008).

Attentive and repeated viewing of all 23 award-winning PSAs for the audiovisual category revealed that most of them addressed some 'etiquette' problems, which could potentially undermine the image of China as a good host country, but also promoted anti-smoking behaviour, helping the disabled, maintaining harmony and safety, welcoming foreigners, etc. As established by the Notice, the participating PSAs had to be creative, original and easily understood by the Chinese audience. Consequently, some PSAs were produced in cartoon-style animation, others were documentary style; some were overtly political, others were highly symbolic; some engaged celebrities, while others featured ordinary people; some were characterised by humour, others by sentimentalism, and so on.

Despite the rich variety of themes, strategies and styles, three PSAs were so similar in terms of creative idea and artistic expression that, after their broadcast, they became known as the *Beijing Opera Series* (*Jingju xilie* 京剧系列, hereafter BOS). By embedding the most recurrent words, images and sounds in the WBS competition, the BOS appeared representative of the official imagery of a new Brand China that was shaped and promoted to the Chinese population in the pre-Olympic period and became the instrumental case study for this article.

4 Theoretical and Methodological Approach

The three PSAs of the BOS were produced and subtitled in Chinese. As entries for the WBS competition, they were submitted under the name of the CCTV and its Advertising Office, but their production was actually commissioned to two Beijing-based advertising agencies.¹

As suggested by the name itself, the BOS is centred around the theatrical performance of the Beijing Opera. Its creative idea and artistic expression were based on the recommendations of the CGC-SSCC, as the Beijing Opera is one of the most representative forms of China's cultural heritage and part of the 'national essence' (*guocui* 国粹). As a result, the BOS shares the same distinctive features of the spectacle: it gives "primacy to visual sensory and symbolic

¹ *Beijing Opera Celebrities - Interview* and *From Small Look Big* were produced by Finesse Studio (*Beijing dianjingfang guanggao sheji gongzuoshi* 北京点晴坊广告设计工作室), and *You Are the Protagonist* by Mass Media International Advertising (MMIA, *Guang'ergaozhi hezhong guoji guanggao youxian gongsi* 广告之合众国际广告有限公司). Thanks to Li Huyue 李虎跃 (Finesse) and Wang Dequan 王德全 (MMIA) for sharing this information.

codes", has the necessity "to be seen", and reaches "a certain size and grandeur" (MacAloon 1984, 243-5). More importantly, BOS relies on the *conditio sine qua non* of the spectacle: the binary roles of actors/performers and audience/spectators (243). It is precisely this inherent visibility that deserves to be acknowledged and investigated, as it constitutes an important turning point in the self-representation of Brand China.

In the analysis below, I will examine these PSAs as texts that compose what Hall referred to as "the narrative of the nation", or "a set of stories, images, landscapes, scenarios, historical events, national symbols and rituals which stand for or represent the shared experiences, sorrows, and triumphs and disasters which give meaning to the nation" (1992, 293). First, I provide their synopses, which take into account the verbal and the audiovisual elements and include a translation into English,² and also highlight the main camera work. In doing so, I follow the order of the prizes awarded in the WBS competition, from highest to lowest. Then I offer a critical interpretive analysis inspired by semiotics (Barthes 1977; Williamson 1979; Beasley, Danesi 2002), which examines the most recurrent verbal, visual and aural signs of the BOS – namely: stage, performance, actors and spectators – and the main emerging themes. The analysis will focus on the meanings of these texts at a denotational, connotational and ideological level and will reveal their social, cultural and political significance (Baym 2012).

4.1 Synopses

1. *Beijing Opera Celebrities: Interview (Jingju mingjia – Caifang pian 京剧名家 – 采访篇, hereafter PSA1),*³ was honoured with the silver prize at the WBS competition (placed 4th out of 8). This 2-minute PSA opens to the sound of wooden clappers and the image of a floating red theatre curtain. As the pace of the rhythm increases, a series of fast alternated scenes shows the imminent start of a performance of the Beijing Opera and the Beijing 2008 Olympics. The first climax is reached when the theatre curtain opens to reveal the stage, which lights up: however, both the stage and seats are empty. A professional male actor from the Beijing Opera appears, with his name and company shown on the screen, accompanied by a shift to more solemn music. He is filmed using a medium shot, while he speaks towards the camera, wearing formal dress in an indoor setting. Another nine

² Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the Author.

³ http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMzQ1NjcyOTI=.html; <https://advertisingchina.blogspot.com/2021/06/beijing-opera-celebrities-interview.html>.

actors and actresses are then presented in the same way, in the following order of appearance, while they proclaim:

Yu Kuizhi (China National Peking Opera Company, hereafter CNPOC): "When the minute hand pointed that moment/the whole world shouted in one voice/2008 Beijing Olympics" (*Dang shizhen zhixiang nayi ke/putianzhixia huhuanzhe tong yige shengyin/2008 Beijing Aoyun* 当时针指向那一刻/普天之下呼唤着同一个声音/2008北京奥运)

Yuan Huiqin (CNPOC): "The Beijing Olympics showed the Chinese people's longing for harmony/showed China as a land of propriety" (*Beijing Aoyun zhanshi le Zhongguoren dui hexie de qidai/zhanshi le Zhongguo shi liyizhibang* 北京奥运展示了中国人对和谐的期待/展示了中国是礼仪之邦)

Zhang Jianguo (CNPOC): "Olympics, the Chinese are waiting for you/the Chinese welcome you/the Chinese bless you" (*Aoyun, Zhongguoren qipan ni/Zhongguoren huanying ni/Zhongguoren zhu fu ni* 奥运, 中国人期盼你/中国人欢迎你/中国人祝福你)

Zhang Huoding (CNPOC): "Beijing Olympics, China's big stage/ is bursting with endless splendour" (*Beijing Aoyun, Zhongguo dawutai/zhanfangzhe wuxian de jingcai* 北京奥运会, 中国大舞台/绽放着无限的精彩)

Yang Chi (Dalian Peking Opera Troupe): "One World, One Dream/ One Stage/this stage shows the uprightness and integrity of Chinese civilisation/ancient Cathay is entering a splendid era" (*Tong yige shijie, tong yige mengxiang/tong yige wutai/zhege wutai zhan-shizhe Zhonghua wenming de fengcai/youjiu Huaxia haomai shid-ai* 同一个世界, 同一个梦想/同一个舞台/这个舞台展示着中华文明的风采/悠久华夏豪迈时代)

Wang Rongrong (Beijing Peking Opera Company, hereafter BPOC): "Singing, reciting, acting, acrobatic fighting/we draw on every vivid detail of the arts/spring, summer, autumn, winter/we display each wonderful season in front of the Five Rings" (*Chang nian zuo da/women xiang yishu jiqu mei yige shengdong de xijie/chun xia qiu dong/women xiang wuhuan chengxian mei yige canlan de jijie* 唱念做打/我们向艺术汲取每一个生动的细节/春夏秋冬/我们向五环呈现每一个灿烂的季节)

Li Shengsu (CNPOC): "Every single detail of the Olympics/is a beautiful memory for every Chinese person" (*Beijing Aoyun de di-andian didi/dou shi mei yige Zhongguoren de meihao jiyi* 北京奥运的点点滴滴/都是每一个中国人的美好记忆)

Chi Xiaoqi (Beijing Peking Opera Company, BPOC): "Welcome the Olympics, Be Civilised, Set New Trends/is the honour of each of us/the responsibility of each of us" (*Ying Aoyun, jiang wenming, shu xinfeng/shi mei yige ren de guangrong/mei yige ren de zeren* 迎奥运, 讲文明, 树新风/是每一个人的光荣/每一个人的责任)

Wang Yan (Tianjin Peking Opera Company): "The Olympics are a new start/our pursuit for civilisation never ends" (*Aoyun shi xin de qidian/women dui wenming de zhuiqiu yongyuan mei you zhongdian* 奥运是新的起点/我们对文明的追求永远没有终点)

Meng Guanglu (Tianjin Youth Peking Opera Troupe): "Transmit civilisation, contribute to the Olympics/light up the torch, sing China loud and proud" (*Chuanzai wenming, fengxian Aoyun/dianliang shenghuo, changxiang Zhongguo* 转载文明, 奉献奥运/点亮圣火, 唱响中国)

In terms of visual language, there are shots of the actors' performances in make-up and costume, both on the theatre stage and in outdoor settings, and on the official Olympic countdown.

The second climax is reached when a two-string spike fiddle starts to play frantically, and a Beijing Opera female role - *Dan* 丹 - appears on the screen. The camera zooms in on her eyes and hand movements, with alternating close-ups on the musical instrument. As the rhythm reaches its peak, she strikes a pose: in the final shot, she is shown standing on the stage with her back to the camera, while the curtains open to show modern buildings and skyscrapers. The pay-off "Step onto the World stage, sing China's opera" (*Deng shijie de tai, chang Zhongguo de xi* 登世界的台, 唱中国的戏) appears on the screen, also read by a male voice-over.

2. *From Small Look Big* (*Yixiao jianda pian* 以小见大篇, hereafter PSA2)⁴ was awarded the bronze prize (placed 9th out of 10). This 1-minute 30-second PSA opens to percussion music with a long shot of a theatre stage, where four roles of the Beijing Opera are standing. We then see a series of acrobatics and ancient flags are waved on the stage. One of these transforms into the Olympic flag, which is waved by an athlete with a modern cityscape in the background. Next, four of the Beijing Opera actors who starred in PSA1 appear on the screen. Each of them talks straight to the camera, and every verbal narrative is followed by a parallel visual narrative, as follows:

⁴ https://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMzgINDkzMTY=.html?spm=a2h0c.8166622.PhoneSokuUgc_12.dttitle; <https://advertisingchina.blogspot.com/2021/06/from-small-look-big.html>.

Meng Guanglu: "A performance of the Beijing Opera/can narrate a splendid history/an edition of the Olympic Games/can interpret the spirit of sport/a proper manner/can express the uprightness and integrity of a land of ceremony" (*Yi tai Jingju/keyi yanyi jingcai lishi/yi jie Aoyunhui/keyi quanshi tiyu jingshen/yige youya juzhi/keyi zhanxian liyizhibang de fengcai* 一台京剧/可以演绎精彩历史/一届奥运会/可以诠释体育精神/一个优雅举止/可以展现礼仪之邦的风采)

Inside a modern building, a man sees a girl who is carrying a heavy pile of books. He helps her by calling the elevator, and by letting her enter first.

Chi Xiaoqi: "A gesture/can express the artistic pursuit of a Beijing Opera actor/a civilised behaviour/can reflect the quality and self-cultivation of a nation" (*Yige zhaoshi/neng tixian Jingju yanyuan de yishu zhuiqiu/yige wenming xingwei/neng fanying guoming de suzhi xiuyang* 一个招式/能体现京剧演员的艺术追求/一个文明行为/能反映国民的素质修养)

In a supermarket, a teenage boy, as soon as he realises he is jumping the queue, self-consciously joins the queue and bows to apologise.

Yuan Huiqin: "A graceful movement/can arouse the fans' deep admiration/a friendly smile/can make the entire world eulogise this city" (*Yige youmei shenduan/neng rang ximi pai'an jiaohao/yige youshan weixiao/neng rang quan shijie dou zanmei zhezuo chengshi* 一个优美身段/能让戏迷拍案叫好/一个友善微笑/能让全世界都赞美这座城市)

In a modern city, a waiter notices a forgotten camera. He dashes outside the restaurant, runs into the street and looks for the owner - who turns out to be a foreign girl. When he returns the camera to her, she looks extremely surprised and grateful.

Zhang Jianguo: "A tuneful melody/can cause the fans to remember an actor/the good image of a host/can cause the entire world to remember this country" (*Yiduan didao de changqiang/neng rang ximi jizhu yige yanyuan/yige dongdao zhu de lianghao xingxiang/neng rang quan shijie dou jizhu zhege guojia* 一段地道的唱腔/能让戏迷记住一个演员/一个东道主的良好形象/能让全世界都记住这个国家)

Inside a theatre, the audience is leaving after a performance. A little girl sees some rubbish left on the empty seats; she picks it up and throws it into the nearest bin. She then smiles towards the camera.

The PSA closes on a series of shots depicting the four characters from the initial scene getting ready to perform, accompanied by a rhythmic escalation of melodic music, ending with the lights coming on and lighting up their faces. The pay-off “2008 Olympics, World’s Grand Meeting, China’s Elegant Demeanour” (2008 *Aoyunhui, shijie shenghui, Zhongguo fengcai* 2008奥运会, 世界盛会, 中国风采) appears on the screen.

3. *You Are the Protagonist* (*Zhujiao shi ni pian* 主角是你篇, hereafter PSA3)⁵ was awarded the bronze prize (placed 10th out of 10). This 1-minute PSA opens with long-shots of a red theatre curtain and an empty stage. One by one, different roles of the Beijing Opera appear and perform: their moves are cadenced with intermittent flashing lights. Close-ups first show the details of a female character’s hand movements and facial expression, then the clapping hands of the audience.

As the music becomes more melodic, the theatrical performance is superimposed with footage of the Olympic torch journey. When a female voice starts to sing, a Dan role turns her head 180 degrees, so that the shot shifts from a frontal shot to a shot from behind, from which the viewer sees a totally different scene. Three main visual narratives accompany what is stated by the male voice-over, as follows:

Voice-over: “Beijing 2008 is attracting the world’s gaze...” (*Beijing 2008 huijuzhe quanqiu de muguang* 北京2008汇聚着全球的目光)

Ten Chinese people are standing in an orderly fashion on a new theatre stage, with the Bird’s Nest and fireworks behind them. There are close-ups of their faces, alternated with shots of Beijing Opera actors performing and an audience of foreigners, who are clapping enthusiastically.

(continued) “... every word and every action of 1.3 billion Chinese/ every move and action on the stage of China...” (*shisan yi Zhongguoren de yiyanyixing/Shenzhou da wutai de jushoutuo zu* 十三亿中国人的一眼一行/神州大舞台的举手投足)

Shots of the Imperial Palace, modern buildings lit up by the sun and dragon dances.

(continued) “... is a performance by China in front of the entire world/ a big show displaying Chinese civilisation” (*jiu shi Zhong-*

⁵ http://archive.wenming.cn/gygg/2008-07/31/content_14275793.htm; <https://advertisingchina.blogspot.com/2021/06/you-are-protagonist.html>.

guo chengxian zai quan shijie mianqian de yanchu/jiu shi zhanxi-an Huaxia wenming de da xi 就是中国呈现在全世界面前的演出/就是展现华夏文明的大戏)

Shots of a group of Chinese people chatting, zoom-out and gradual lateral/angle shot of the stage, from which we can see fireworks and modern buildings lit up in colours.

4.2 Analysis

4.2.1 From the China Stage to the World Stage: China's Quest for Visibility

On the denotational level, the sign 'stage' refers to the physical space in which a theatrical performance takes place. The stage is what exists between the actors and the spectators, what connects them: not surprisingly, it is the multimodal signifier from which the three PSAs start, and where they all end.

The stage portrayed in these PSAs is a dynamic sign, as it changes and evolves as the plot unfolds, taking up different connotations. In PSA1 and PSA3, the stage gradually transforms from a dark stage to a lit-up stage: this lighting strategy creates an atmosphere of increasing exposure. The stage also evolves from an empty and still stage to a stage full of actors and animated by performances. The feeling of imminency and excitement towards what is about to happen is amplified not only visually, but also aurally, through the growing pace of the rhythm of the background music.

Moreover, the stage extends from a theatre stage in the traditional sense to a set of outdoor alternative stages, such as ancient historical sites, modern buildings and urban settings. The latter feature skyscrapers, which represent successful economic development (Pramod 2008). It is precisely the juxtaposition of skyscrapers with the Beijing Opera that serves to promote "Beijing's 'otherness'", which is "often presented visually through the traditional forms of culture that position China as simultaneously unchanging and modern" (Collins 2008, 201). In PSA2, the alternative stages are rendered visually as scenes of daily life, such as the entrance to an elevator, a supermarket, a restaurant, and the seats in a theatre. Interestingly, in PSA3, the stage on which the leading actors are standing is transformed into a stage from which they become spectators, which will be discussed later.

On the connotational level, the 'stage' refers to the Olympic stage. Ultimately, its most important evolution is the one emphasised, either verbally, visually or both, in each PSA: from the China stage to the World stage. PSA1 conveys this explicitly in the body copy, in which

the emphasis falls on the dual character of the stage: in its first occurrence - as 'China's big stage' - it conveys the idea that the Olympics belong to China and re-affirms the fact that the country has a legacy of entitlement to host the Games; in its last occurrence - as 'the World stage' - it highlights the global dimension of the Olympics, and celebrates China's successful step onto this international platform [fig. 1].



Figure 1
China steps onto the World stage (PSA1)

It is worth remembering here that hosting the Olympics was part of a long process, interwoven with nationalism and cultural pride. The possibility of owning the Olympic stage - or "Olympic platform" (Price 2008, 86) - was constructed and promoted in the official discourse as an opportunity to break free from the ancient denigratory labels linked to bodily weakness and poor sporting performances (Brownell 2008; Xu 2008). The unexpected complication of losing the bid for the 2000 Olympics further fuelled the need to host the 2008 Olympics:

to 'cleanse' this national humiliation, China needed a stage where the country could perform, displaying a strong nation to the world and being 'recognised' by the international community for its recent achievements. (Chong 2017, 82)

In the BOS, China's tortuous Olympic path and the national sentiments it aroused are conveyed as fragmented memories, which are thick with heavy ideological significance. The incipit of PSA1, for example, refers to the historical moment in 2001 when Samaranch, the former President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), announced that Beijing was going to be the next Olympic host city. This event marked a defining milestone for Brand China: once the Olympic stage was awarded, hosting the Games was constructed in the official Chinese-language sources as the fulfilment of a 'one-hundred-year-old dream' (*bainian Aoyun mengxiang* 百年奥运梦想) (Puppini 2008; 2011). This further demonstrates that the 2008 Summer Games were exploited by the Chinese government to erect a new cultural identity, through different uses and reconstructions of domestic and international collective memory (Gong 2012).

Olympic PSAs were not overtly concerned with representing “the dominant sense of reality” (Fiske 1987, 21), but rather representing how the country ought to be during the imminent Games: a desired, imagined China, which first and foremost had to be visible. The “paradigm of visibility” articulated by Dayan (2013, 139) is particularly useful in understanding this crucial aspect. With specific reference to the role of media in coordinating collective attention, he proposes a paradigmatic shift from a narrative of victimisation to a narrative of deprivation: in the latter, the story narrates the successful conquest of visibility that was previously lacking. In the light of this, China can be understood as a “visibility seeker” (Dayan 2013, 139): for the country, owning the Olympic stage was directly linked to a conquest of visibility and, hence, power.

4.2.2 Beyond Sport: China's 'CivilOlympic' Performances

The use of the Beijing Opera was a recurrent strategy in Olympic promotional materials, as it proved to be “a resilient marker of contemporary Chinese-ness able to negotiate the complex, often conflicting impulses Brand China conveys” (Evans 2012, 114). The Beijing Opera constitutes one of the most localised Olympic elements, that is to say, those elements involving the particular features of a specific place, also known as “a city's ‘place’ image” (Roche 2006, 10).

It is worth highlighting that the Beijing 2008 constituted a challenge for Brand China, as the country had to embrace a global event, but still retain its own specificity, by embedding it in narratives that had to (re)negotiate tradition and modernity, blend East and West elements, as well as go beyond the local/global binary opposition.

As it is evident from the synopses, beyond the Beijing Opera there is also another performance being staged: that of ‘civilisation’ (*wenming* 文明). Anagnost (1997) describes *wenming* as

a potent signifier [...] a densely figured site that articulates statist projects of national pedagogy, intellectual critiques of Chinese national character, and popular concerns about social order. (75)

As Chinese PSAs are used as State-sanctioned tools for the construction of a 'socialist spiritual civilisation' (*shehuizhuyi jingshen wenming* 社会主义精神文明) (Lewis 2002; Stockmann 2011; Puppini 2018) it is hardly surprising that their contents were aligned with one of the priorities of the Chinese authorities: to ensure that China stepped on to the Olympic stage as a civilised nation. Indeed, the Mayor of Beijing at that time, Mr Wang Qishan, had already expressed his biggest concern in 2004: the 'quality' of Beijingers, intended both as civilised Olympic hosts and civilised members of the sport audience (Xu 2006).

In PSA1, the only visible performance is the Beijing Opera, whilst the performance of civilisation is discursively constructed in the verbal language. This is achieved through the repeated use of the word 'civilisation', but also through historical poetic expressions used to identify China, such as 'land of propriety', and 'ancient Cathay', which perpetuate the myth of the country's five-thousand-year-old civilisation.

In PSA2, the two performances of the Beijing Opera and Chinese civilisation coexist in the visual language in the form of parallel narratives. In the same way as the Beijing Opera actors pay attention to every 'gesture', 'posture' and 'melody' if they want to be appreciated by the audience, in the Beijing Olympics every Chinese citizen has to display 'civilised behaviour, a 'friendly smile', as well as the 'good image of a host', if he/she wants China to be remembered positively. The correlation between the professional skills of the actors and the civilised behaviour of the Chinese citizens becomes explicit, and the qualities of both are validated by external parties: the theatre audience and the citizens of China and the whole world, respectively [fig. 2].



Figure 2
An example of civilised
behaviour (PSA2)

PSA3 visually portrays only the performance of civilisation, which is conveyed through the smiling faces and orderly postures of the protagonists standing on the stage. Another performance is then visualised through colourful fireworks, which connote an atmosphere of festive celebration, thus maximising the impact of the verbal message. This 'big show' and 'performance' by China can be interpreted as the country's own representation of the Olympic spectacle, of which civilisation is an indistinguishable component.

In this context, the concept of “semiotic over-determination” (Sun 2002, 116) is particularly useful. In her study on the Chinese media’s coverage and reception of the Sydney 2000 Olympics, Sun (2002) explains how this over-determination consists of associating “the achievement of individual Chinese athletes with that of the nation”, in which sports events are interpreted as both “metaphors and metonyms of China’s greatness in an international context” (123). In the BOS, however, sporting performance is never mentioned nor represented: here, the over-determination lies in the directly proportional link between the degree of civilisation of every Chinese citizen with the overall performance of the nation in this global mega event. In the light of this, my neologism ‘CivilOlympics’ seems particularly appropriate to describe the indissoluble relationship between the Beijing 2008 Olympics and Chinese civilisation: whilst the two performances coexist, it is civilisation that over-determines Brand China, and the success of the country in the Games. More importantly, the civilisation performance has to be seen: this is exemplified by the use of verbs semantically related to visibility and exposure, such as ‘show’, ‘burst’, and ‘display’.

4.2.3 Professional Actors, *Extraordinary Citizens*, and an Anthropomorphised China

The main protagonists of the three PSAs are all Han Chinese. Interestingly, there are no representatives of any ethnic minority, who instead featured in the official Olympic narratives intended for viewing outside of China, such as the flag-raising ceremony (Barmé 2009). The protagonists of the BOS also share another characteristic: they are all examples of an idealised civility. This finding demonstrates that the tradition of setting exemplary ‘models’ (*bangyang* 榜样) for the masses to emulate and internalise is still alive and well in contemporary China, and is enhanced precisely via PSAs (Landsberger 2009; Puppini 2018).

Despite the subtle and symbolic visual imagery, the pedagogical intent of the BOS emerges in the prescriptive tone. This is conveyed through the use of either celebrities’ direct speech (PSA1 and PSA2) or of an authoritative male voice-over (PSA3), which equally assist the viewers in the construction of the preferred meaning and guarantee the dominant-hegemonic decoding (Hall [1973] 1980).

It was not the creative decision of the advertising agencies to feature the most famous actors of the Beijing Opera: for the first time in the history of Chinese PSAs, it was the Notice that explicitly required the local authorities and advertising agencies to recruit Chinese celebrities. In the Party-State’s intentions, their involvement served to drive the compelling need to mobilise “practical support

for the Olympics, reflecting the national spirit and setting a good example for the entire population" (Wenming.cn 2007).

Interestingly, the BOS is characterised by a gradual shift of focus from celebrities to ordinary people: first the protagonists are only celebrities (PSA1), then also ordinary people (PSA2), and, finally, just ordinary people (PSA3). Even in PSA1 alone, this trend is perceptible: the ten famous actors not only appear under the guise of the fictional roles they play in the Beijing Opera, but also that of real people behind masks and costumes, and even off-stage - in their changing rooms. This strategy provides a sense of nonfictionality, as well as intimacy, which is also conveyed through the use of a true-seeming conversation between the actors and the viewers at home. Whilst there is no visual portrayal of ordinary Chinese people, these are referred to in the verbal language through expressions such as 'us' and 'Chinese people', which intend to create inclusiveness and strengthen a common national identity.

In PSA2, the appearance of ordinary Chinese people - a young man, a boy, a waiter and a little girl - as protagonists becomes manifest in the parallel visual narratives, which depict them while they are performing small, civilised gestures in episodes of real life, in perfect alignment with the PSA title. In his study on the presentation of the self in everyday life, Goffman pointed out the idealised nature of social performances: "when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society" ([1959] 1990, 45). In the light of this, it becomes evident that the good deeds of these protagonists, which are constructed as ordinary and spontaneous, are the results of the internalisation of the standards of civilisation and moral values officially set by the Party-State.

PSA3 is the only one that does not feature celebrities: it first portrays four roles from the Beijing Opera, and, later, ten ordinary Chinese people. These ordinary people share the following characteristics: they are smiling; they are young; they are standing in an orderly manner; they have a modern and appropriate attitude whether they are casually dressed (t-shirt), or formally dressed (business suit). The recruitment of Olympic volunteers and the creation of model citizens gave preference to "young, healthy, law-abiding, and educated citizens who had mastered at least one foreign language", that is to say, "the young and educated subjects who embody the best of China" (Chong 2017, 75). Evidently, the ten Chinese people standing on the stage have been selected for their high degree of civilisation, which renders them *extraordinary*. Compared to the protagonists of PSA2, here they play a bigger role, as they occupy the main stage and narrative, but they are not portrayed as performing any good deeds: they are simply exposed as exemplary models of civilisation [fig. 3].



Figure 3
Ten extraordinary citizens (PSA3)

Interestingly, towards the end of the PSA, the ten protagonists end up lost within a larger crowd of people and, therefore, become indistinguishable. This visual strategy is aligned with the title, which emphasises that 'you' are the protagonist, and aims at creating a sense of identification and inclusion for the audience at home: anybody - even you - can be *extraordinary*. At the same time, from actors they become spectators, and this activates a dynamic of being seen/seeing: as 'civilised bodies', they can fully enjoy the great spectacle of the Beijing 2008 Olympics.

Whilst it is true that, in general, the "wenming discourse is a discourse of lack, referring to the failure of the Chinese people to embody international standards of modernity, civility, and discipline" (Anagnost 1997, 75), it is also true that in the BOS it becomes one of imagined presence, abundance, profusion, inclusion. Civilisation, here, is finally owned and displayed.

Taking a closer look, there is also another protagonist: the female leading role Dan, who becomes prominent in PSA3 as the anthropomorphic metaphor of China. In PSA3, when Dan dances and strikes her poses in traditional makeup and costume, she appears self-aware, confident and proud of her exoticism, which visibly pleases the international audience. This is an example of "strategic self-orientalism" - an evolution of Said's (1978) seminal theory of Orientalism - according to which "those who cannot avoid being racialized as 'oriental' embrace rather than reject their stereotyping as ... inscrutable exotics" (Cheng 2013, 153). Here, Dan is constructed in a self-ethnicised way that deliberately triggers the orientalist imagination of the international audience and challenges the dominant representations that hold the East as passive and the West as active.

Another significant notion here is the "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey 1975, 11), which was applied by Chow (1995) in her study on contemporary Chinese cinema and explained as being

built into the way non-Western cultures are viewed by Western ones; more significantly it is part of the active manner in which such cultures represent-ethnographize-themselves. (180)

Dan, whose face is lit up by camera flashes, is offering herself to the audience's gaze, in a sensual, narcissistic and exhibitionist way: she is on display, as a gendered and sexualised object, and gains pleasure in being looked at, in a way that plays with the audience's voyeuristic fantasy and goes beyond the active/looking, passive/looked-at dichotomy [fig. 4].



Figure 4
Dan under the spotlights (PSA3)

As a result, the BOS embeds the representational strategies typical of China's transnational visuality that render the country a "cultural object" that is "exoticized, eroticized, or politicized", reducing the country to "a set of internationally recognizable and consumable symbols" (Lu 2001, 20).

5 (In)visible Western Spectators and China's (Re)gained Global Visibility

Another significant feature of the BOS, which is aligned with the theory of the spectacle, is the actual or implied presence of spectators, which is conveyed through the intradiegetic depiction of an (in)visible audience. Ultimately, it is the spectator who is responsible for judging the performance, not the performer (Carlson 2004). The role of spectators is therefore crucial in evaluating China's performance in the Olympic context.

PSA1 does not visually portray an audience of the Beijing Opera theatrical performance: the few shots on the theatre seats show them empty. This is because the BOS was created and broadcast in the pre-Olympic period: the empty seats reinforce the need to prepare for the upcoming Games (as if it were a theatre rehearsal) and create a feeling of excitement in the audience at home. Nonetheless, in the last frame, an imagined audience appears under the guise of a modern urban landscape, which is a metonym for the entire world:

this climax in China's exposure is to be understood as the imagined start of the Olympics.

Similarly, in PSA2 the theatrical performance takes place without a visible audience, whilst the civilisation performance has some visible intra-diegetic spectators. These include ordinary Chinese people (the girl holding the books in front of the elevator, and the people queuing in the supermarket), but also foreigners (the girl who forgot the camera). In particular, the foreign girl was chosen on a paradigmatic level as a metonym for 'the entire world' and is associated with the achievement of civilisation that will lead people 'to eulogise this city', as explained by the verbal language. This strategy promotes in every Chinese person the responsibility for the successful hosting of the Beijing 2008 Olympics, under the scrutiny of the Western Other. As explained by Chong, in the Olympic volunteer programme "the imagined responses from the invisible, yet omnipresent, 'Westerners' operated as disciplinary tools" (2017, 95). Drawing on Foucault, she illustrated how visibility was crucial in governing and disciplining Chinese citizens, who were supposed to internalise this gaze and behave according to the civilisation ideals set by the Party-State. There is a similar dynamic at work in the BOS, but here the disciplinary gaze of the Western Other is actually visible.

PSA3 is characterised by the intra-diegetic portrayal of a visible audience, which is first shown sitting in the theatre by zooming out with the image slightly blurred, and then zooming in sharply and clearly: it is evidently an audience of foreign spectators. Among them, the main viewing subject is both ethnicised and gendered in a conventional way: as a Western male Other [fig. 5].

It is significant that the casting preference of portraying the Western Other dates back precisely to the pre-Olympic period. PSAs were born and developed in China as a form of internal communication addressing the domestic audience, which portrayed almost exclusively the Chinese Self. The protagonists have historically been Chinese people (be they Han or ethnic minorities, famous testimonials or ordinary people); the themes touch upon their everyday lives and the narratives and styles adopted their perspective (Zhang 2004; Yu 2007).

The portrayal of an enthusiastic international audience symbolises the scopophilic desire and pleasure the world derives from watching China's performance. This representational strategy meets China's need for acknowledgement and approval of its performative success beyond national borders. At the same time, it is indicative of China's imagination and desire for 'global visibility', defined as

the ongoing, late capitalist phenomenon of mediatized spectacularization in which the endeavour to seek social recognition amounts to an incessant production and consumption of oneself and one's group as images on display. (Chow 2007, 22)

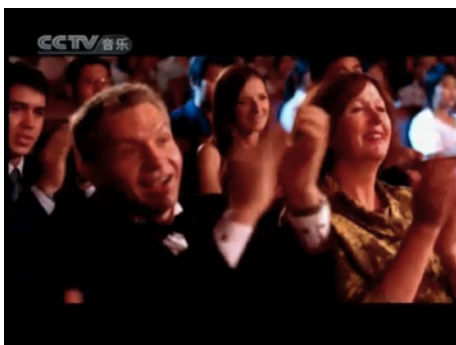


Figure 5
An audience composed
of Western Others (PSA3)

From being a “visibility seeker” (Dayan 2013, 139), China becomes here ‘globally visible’: the country’s raising status on the global scale, and its newly (re)gained visibility are represented as being finally sought in the happy end that characterises the BOS, portraying China in different symbolic forms, under the spotlight and attracting the world’s attention.

6 Conclusions

The starting point of this article is that, with the approach of the Beijing 2008 Olympics, China’s need to improve its image on the global stage became more urgent than ever, and this priority also influenced the way the country imagined its national identity and represented itself in media texts targeting the domestic audience – first and foremost in terms of visibility. In order to fill in a gap in the existing literature, this article investigates how a ‘new’ Brand China was promoted in the pre-Olympic period, by identifying the most recurrent representational strategies that appeared in Olympic PSAs and by offering a semiotic analysis of a representative case study – the BOS.

The findings of the critical interpretive analysis show that the most recurrent words, images and sounds in the BOS are strictly aligned with the distinctive features attributed to the spectacle, in particular, the emphasis on the visual and symbolic codes, as well as the binary roles of performers and spectators.

The theatre stage – which symbolically stands for the Olympic stage – is closely linked to China’s long-standing dream of owning the Games and ongoing desire to achieve global visibility. These features are illustrative of China’s status as a “visibility seeker” (Dayan 2013, 139). The most important evolution of the stage is from the China stage to the World stage: this strategy re-affirms the coun-

try's legacy to host the Games and celebrates its stepping onto the international Olympic platform.

In terms of performance, China and the imminent Beijing 2008 Olympics are here imagined through the metaphor of the theatrical performance of the Beijing Opera. Interestingly, there is no explicit reference to the Olympic/sport performance; instead, it is the civilisation performance that plays a central role. The latter over-determines the successful hosting of the Games: through a variety of narrative strategies, it links the degree of civilisation of Chinese citizens with the country's performance in the Olympic context, thus over-determining the successful hosting of the Games. My suggested neologism 'CivilOlympics' fully conveys the indissoluble relationship between the Beijing 2008 Olympics and China's civilisation, which has first and foremost to be seen, as it is stressed in the visual and verbal language.

The performers include some famous actors of the most important Beijing Opera theatre companies and the roles they play. Within the latter, it is worth mentioning the Dan role, who stands as a self-orientalist, gendered and sexualised anthropomorphic metaphor for China. The self-portrayal of China as an exotic, sensual and confident female who is exhibiting herself and directing the audience's attention can be interpreted, on the ideological level, as China's acquisition of visibility and power on the global scene. In the BOS, the real main protagonists are ordinary Chinese people, who are constructed as *extraordinary* for their high degree of civilisation, which is exemplified through a variety of good deeds that they carry out in their everyday life. The BOS is also characterised by audiovisual strategies that create a sense of inclusivity in the viewers at home, and this confirms that PSAs in contemporary China play a crucial role in setting and promoting exemplary models to the masses. Another peculiar characteristic of the BOS is the intradiegetic presence of some (in)visible spectators. The portrayal of an imagined audience validates China's performative success and transition from its status of "visibility seeker" (Dayan 2013, 139) to its being 'globally visible'. It is significant that, for the first time in the history of Chinese PSAs, in the BOS there was space for the imaginative portrayal of a Western Other. The unconventional representation of the West as the passive spectator of China's active performance, this way, becomes a new way of fantasising about an alternative world order - in which China is the protagonist and the rest of the world is watching - in the 21st century.

This article demonstrates that a close examination of Olympic TV PSAs as a tool for national branding provides original and useful insights to understand how China visualised itself and the imminent global media event of the Beijing 2008 Olympics. It contributes to broader theoretical debates and empirical findings on the Olympic spectacle and a new Brand China, by identifying PSAs as sites of identity performance, which are intrinsically related to issues of self-

identity, tensions of local/global dualism and national ethnocentrism. More importantly, this article reveals that the Beijing 2008 Olympics influenced and redefined the ways China represented itself and the world through 'fantasies' aimed at arousing national sentiment in a historical moment of increased (trans)national visibility.

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