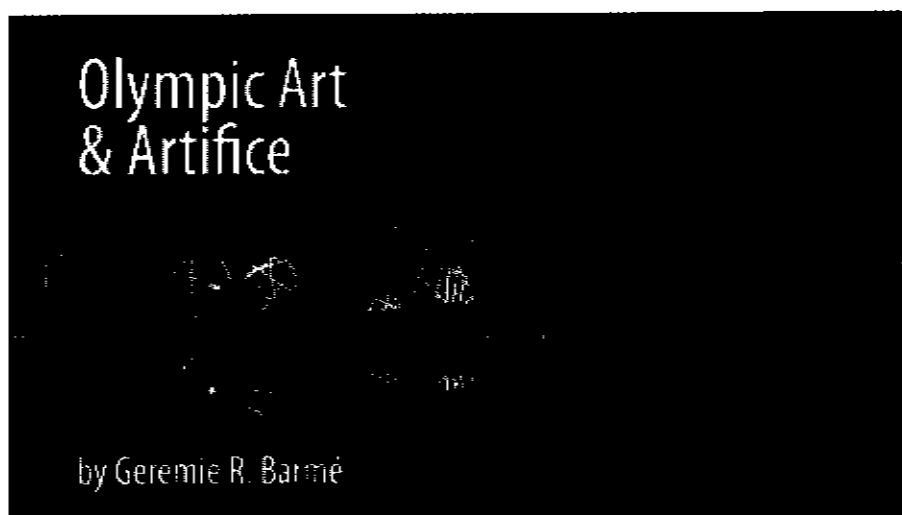


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The year 2008 is a significant one for the People's Republic of China. Of course, there will be the Beijing Olympic Games, scheduled to start on August 8—the auspicious eighth day of the eighth month (eight, *ba/bat*, is a near homophone for “success”, *fajfat*, in both Mandarin and Cantonese). But another, little noticed date might actually tell us more about the true state of Chinese affairs: the 110th anniversary of the tumultuous Hundred Days' Reform (*Wuxu bianfa*).

The Hundred Days' Reform of 1898 marks a period when the young Guangxu Emperor of the last Chinese imperial dynasty (the Qing, 1644–1911) attempted to promulgate wide-ranging reforms of China's political, educational and cultural life. In part inspired by the earlier Meiji reforms that transformed Japan into a modern (and eventually imperialist) polity, the Guangxu Emperor issued a series of edicts designed to set his country on a course of modernization and national renewal.

The forces of reaction, however, won the day. Conservative political and military leaders engineered a palace coup to abort the reforms, bringing the emperor's aunt, the Empress Dowager Cixi, back into power for a disastrous further decade of imperial decline. The year 2008 will also mark the centenary of her eventual demise at the age of 73 in a palace on a site where China's Communist leaders still hold high-level meetings—in Zhongnan Hai (the Lake Palaces), adjacent to the Forbidden City.

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**about the author**

Geremie R. Barmé is a Chinese history at the A National University. He journal *China Heritage* (chinaheritagequarterly latest book, *The Forbid* released by Harvard Un in May 2008.

China's Communist leadership is familiar with the story of the Hundred Days' Reform. When, in 1978, Deng Xiaoping and his cohort of supporters overturned the policies of Maoist China and initiated the reforms that launched the country's emergence as a superpower, many independent commentators remarked that what Guangxu had attempted eighty years earlier might now be realized. Certainly, the country's economy has revived and grown, but the broader reforms that China's thinking people have hoped for have yet to be achieved. That is why, as the 2008 Olympics are celebrated with histrionics and hyperbolic patriotic fervor in Beijing, many disaffected Chinese—men and women who have worked hard for media openness, greater human rights, judicial independence and true freedom of expression through their writings, films, books, activism and social engagement—will watch the global adulation of their country's achievement in a somber mood.

#### BANNED IN BEIJING

One friend of mine, the well-known oral historian Sang Ye, shared his sardonic reflections on 2008 and its dark anniversaries after learning that a film banned for 57 years was screened without fanfare in Beijing in December last year. We discussed the Hong Kong-made *Secret History of the Qing Court* that was first released throughout China during the dying days of the Chinese Civil War in 1948. The film tells the story—or at any rate a story—of the 1898 reforms, the re-emergence of the Empress Dowager, the disastrous Boxer Rebellion of 1900 and the ignominious flight of the court in the face of a foreign expeditionary force that invaded the Celestial Capital. (This episode is perhaps best known to international audiences through the 1963 Hollywood movie *55 Days at Peking*, starring David Niven, Charlton Heston and Ava Gardner.) *Secret History* also depicts the prelude of the Qing dynasty's collapse and then the nearly three decades of internecine strife that followed.

Sang Ye related how Mao Zedong and his colleagues, having established their new government headquarters in Zhongnan Hai in central Beijing, used to regularly entertain themselves by attending film screenings. As it happened, one of the first films to be shown was *Secret History of the Qing Court*.

Watching the film in the Spring Lotus-root Studio of Zhongnan Hai in 1950, Mao and his colleagues could take comfort in the fact that the Communist Party had brought an end to the dynasty portrayed in the film that had concluded its days in political instability, social dislocation, economic decline and national humiliation. But Mao also saw in the film a dangerous message, one made all the more potent because it was delivered by some of the most popular screen idols of the day. *Secret History* sympathized with the Guangxu Emperor's attempts to modernize and reform China politically without violence or social upheaval. To the champions of violent revolution, class struggle and the radical reshaping of Chinese society sitting in Zhongnan Hai that day in 1950, this was nothing short of subversive. Mao declared the film an invidious "poisonous weed" that sold out the interests of the nation. The Party orchestrated a nationwide denunciation, and banned the film by fiat.

When *The Secret History of the Qing Court* was re-screened in Beijing this past December, 57 years after Mao's ban, it was shown as part of a small

film festival organized to celebrate the career of Zhou Xuan, the singer and actress who had a role in the film as the Pearl Consort, a reform-minded young woman who is said to have been murdered by the Empress Dowager. However, in the present atmosphere of hyper-nationalism the movie is unlikely to enjoy a wider showing. The Hundred Days' Reform will invariably be commemorated this year by sober academic conferences and discussions both in China and internationally. As was the case ten years ago at the centenary commemoration, there will be veiled references to "unfinished business", and conferees will remark *sotto voce* upon the abiding nature of the ultra-stable system of autocratic Chinese rule that deploys a mix of coercive power, economic cartels and cultural ideology to maintain what is now celebrated as the country's "harmonious society."

## IMAGINEERING CHINA

Today's Communist Party leadership remains as anxious to maintain its dominance over the past, and interpretations of it, as ever. History matters as the country positions itself culturally, as well as economically and diplomatically, for a major international role in the future. It is not just a matter of commemorating events with suitable fanfare. How the past is seen, what is recorded of it, and how it is interpreted are all crucial to the way the present and the future are imagined. This was particularly obvious in early 2006, when Party General Secretary and President Hu Jintao approved the banning of an online journal that had published a highly contentious essay by the historian Yuan Weishi. Among other things, Yuan had said that Chinese history as taught in high school texts was dangerously distorted, and that accounts of major incidents involving foreign incursions in China in the 1850s and 1900s (the Boxer Rebellion, in particular) were skewed by xenophobic exaggeration.

While the authorities still pay lip service to the revolutionary ethos that commemorates the destructive and xenophobic Boxers as a progressive force, in reality it is authoritarian reform that they pursue. It is a reform under Party patronage. The political "stability and unity" (*anding tuanjie*) championed during the Deng Xiaoping era has been recast in more traditional terms. Today's "harmonious society" is maintained by political quiescence, police action, economic entanglement, patriotic education, consumer distraction and cultural cooptation. In the past year, the authorities have attempted to address issues of social justice, inequality and the rights of those left behind by rapid modernization, but the political mechanisms to ameliorate social tensions and enhance civil participation in major issues of public concern remain woefully inadequate.

Meanwhile, in the realm of culture, the Internet "gray economy" is booming. The gray economies of information, as opposed to the black markets that trade in overtly illegal contraband, are a form of content arbitrage where individuals take advantage of the imbalance between official news commentary and popular impulses for real change. In the resultant field of exchange, surplus value is generated by controversy, innovation, rumor, hard information and celebrity, among other things. It is this gray economy that Beijing-based online media and urban-life sites like Danwei.org track. And it is the gray economy phenomenon that both aids and stymies the government's plan to turn the 2008 Olympics into an international showcase of Chinese prowess. While critics provide the international media with insights into the egregious failures of the

authorities to enhance human rights and media openness in the run up to the Olympics as promised, rabid nationalist bloggers support the government's hard line on Tibet and the demonization of the "Western media." The hysteria of fickle bloggers, however, can turn against the prevailing government line as easily as it can support it. As a result the "Net Nannies" who police China's electronic media are on constant alert.

In April 2006, the Chinese government announced that the internationally popular Chinese film director Zhang Yimou would lead the group designing the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and they hired a consortium of non-Chinese "imagineers" from Los Angeles (Steven Spielberg), Paris (Yves Pépin) and Sydney (Ric Birch) to help out. (From the start, Spielberg was mindful of how he might use his opportunity to gain some human rights leverage with the Chinese authorities. In February 2008, following nearly two years of frustrated attempts to use his influence—mainly with respect to Darfur—Spielberg announced that he was withdrawing from involvement in the Beijing Olympics.) Few appreciate the extent to which Hollywood has inspired Beijing. China and its Communist Party rulers have enmeshed themselves with Hollywood and its culture of spectacle for decades. Since the 1980s, there has been something of a Transpacific tango going on between Hollywood and the mass media of the last regnant socialist empire. Just as Frederick Taylor's "scientific management" gave V.I. Lenin ideas about assembly-line production, time-management and the power of statistics in the Soviet Union, so Hollywood has long been providing China with tips on how to stage public events.

Early Hollywood mega-flicks and cinematic versions of the Ziegfeld Follies fed into both Soviet and Chinese designs for mass rallies and proletarian *tableaux vivants* of the kind that strangely still live on in North Korea. Hollywood turned choreography and synchronized gymnastics into mesmerizing cinema, far more slick and glitzy than anything the Nazis and their favorite filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl ever produced. The socialist world adapted such cog-in-the-machine balletics to celebrate the state and its unrivalled power. Anyone who has seen, for example, the 1964 Maoist song and dance extravaganza, *The East is Red*, will see that Communist choreographers had carefully studied the best the West had to offer.

*The East is Red* employed the talents of the most outstanding singers and dancers in the country to extol the history of the Chinese Revolution and its leader, Mao Zedong. The staged celebration appeared just as China detonated its first atomic bomb. Both the film and the bomb carried the same message: A new China is rising. That rise was frustrated by the long decade of the Cultural Revolution and the difficult road China has traveled since then. Thus, many Chinese see the 2008 Olympics as a much-delayed opportunity for China to announce its arrival. The theme is admittedly a little different, however: "the East is red" sounds today more like "the East is rich."

One should also not forget that Tiananmen Square was built up to and beyond Cecil B. DeMille scale in 1958 to stage grandiose (and, given the ugly politics of the day, including the disastrous Great Leap Forward, chilling) displays of a million participants or more. An example of such self-congratulatory socialist pageantry was the big parade of October 1, 1999 marking the fiftieth anniversary of the People's Republic. Every province and interest group had a float and a group of marchers in the show.

As recently as 2005, a scaled-down celebration of this kind was held in Lhasa to mark the fortieth anniversary of the formation of the Tibetan Autonomous Region. Fountains embedded in the square beneath the Dalai Lama's Potala Palace dance in time to Communist Party show tunes in a grim simulacrum of Steve Wynn's Bellagio Casino. Little wonder that, at least before the events of March this year, some local artists would call the once holy city "Lasa Weijiasi", or "Lhasa Vegas."

By contrast, China's forthcoming Olympic ceremonies are geared toward a world audience. Host nations invariably use the occasion to promote buoyant, whitewashed versions of their history. They highlight the laudable aspects of a made-to-order national character, and they project to an audience of billions their country's dreams (or at least the dreams agreeable to the design committee and their overseers). These opening and closing pageants are like national *son et lumière* tourist brochures with a touch of Cirque du Soleil existentialism thrown in.

In China's case, however, the attempt at Olympic imagery may not work as planned. It is not entirely obvious that the world will see what China's leaders wish it to see, as the "torch" ritual debacle has already suggested.<sup>1</sup> Even when putting its best foot forward, China too readily shows that it is a foot bound by autocratic habit. For over a century, many of China's leading thinkers and cultural activists have done their best to rid the country of a traditional culture and its trappings that they believed frustrated modernization. They denounced Confucius, and they obliterated with a heavy hand the intricate relationship built into Chinese written culture, ink painting, classical prose, architecture, social customs and local festivals. Virtually no aspect of the past was spared during the years of the Republic (1912–49) and especially the People's Republic (1949–). Yet the Chinese leadership today desires to present the world with a story of 5,000 unbroken years of civilized harmony. The Party is not only rewriting the past to suit its present needs; it is also rewriting the history of radical iconoclasm that marked most of the country's 20th century.

The Olympic imagineers, both Chinese and foreign, thus have had their work cut out for them. They have had to weave a sprightly path through a lot of history and culture that is frankly unpalatable. Those once-hallowed ancient customs—concubinage, slave labor, the domestic servitude of women, or castration of boys being sent into imperial service—might lack a modern, feel-good factor. Instead, the remaining designers will no doubt emphasize the History Channel-friendly aspects of Mother China: fine cuisine, the terra cotta warriors, and imperial dragon symbology.

The Great Wall has also been touted as a symbol of national unity and ethnic amity, neglecting the countless bloody conflicts and relentless violence fought in its shadow for hundreds of years up to the time of the Manchu invasion of the 1640s. Similarly, the murderous expansion of Qing emperors into Mongolia and Xinjiang is now cast in the language of nation-building diplomacy. Muslim rebellions from the 19th to the 20th centuries, the Tibetan uprising of the late 1950s, warfare against tribes in the southwest, or even the mass slaughter of Manchus in the 1910s following the collapse of their dynasty simply have no role in the grand narrative according to which China has always been non-aggressive—"harmonious" even.

Zhang Yimou has declared that he will showcase *recherché* elements of regional culture in his show. He has a track record of doing it in film, a medium he has not been shy about using to celebrate autocratic culture (such as *Hero*, his unintentionally grim 2002 paean to the first Qin emperor, Qin Shihuang, unifier of the Chinese empire). Inevitably, once-subjugated peoples—those that some Han Chinese derisively call the “singing and dancing minorities”, that is, a living breathing ethnographical museum consisting of Mongols, Tibetans, Uyghurs, Dai and Zhuang, to name but a few—will be press-ganged into service, adding exotic color and a sense of rhythm to the proceedings.

#### AN EARTH-BOUND BIRD

From the Olympic celebration in the stunning new stadium known as the Bird's Nest will flow much hyperbole about the economic achievements of China under the tutelage of the Communist Party for the past three decades. The consumerist frenzy of the country's cities will awe those who have not seen them, and there will be endless twittering about the transformations still taking place. The air quality of Beijing and other cities will lead commentators to sound a note of caution (or alarm) about looming environmental catastrophe, and there will also be the now set-piece remarks by foreign reporters on human rights, freedom of speech, judicial independence and the lack of democratic reforms.

This will not, however, capture the essence. The absence of genuine political choice and true freedom of the press as a result of the 1989 post-Tiananmen repression has created in effect a society perpetually on the edge of maturation. The population of the urban-boom areas is complicit in a relationship of negotiated repression with the ruling elites. While standards of living have enjoyed unimaginable improvement and the landscape of China has been transformed, many pressing issues of public interest are on hold. Presumably, the unspoken social pact will endure as long as China is prosperous. Enforced harmony, the “eight-tooth smile” (*bachi weixiao*)—one that shows the optimum number of teeth to visiting foreigners—and national celebration are the order of the day, especially since the grisly events in Tibetan China during March and April this year.

But behind the smile, the gray economy mentioned earlier tells us that voices of discontent can break through the static generated by government “red noise.” Despite the official hype, and the heartfelt celebration of numerous Chinese over the coming months, some Beijing residents have voiced their disgust at the makeover of their city in recent years. Some even blame it on what they call the “traitors” (*hanjian*) in power; that is, leaders in the thrall of global capital and the sell-out international style of the modern metropolis. One Beijing taxi driver interviewed recently by Sang Ye expressed his contempt in a manner typical of an old resident of the city:

*With all their re-planning Beijing has become nothing less than a bird [niao, a Beijing dialect word that also means “crap”]. That off-kilter pair of legs they built for CCTV on the East Third Ring Road is how it walks. Its head is over in the west, the damn gaping maw of the Millennium Monument. Of course, a bird needs a nest, doesn't it? Well, the nest has been plonked down on the North Fourth Ring Road. On the radio they even boast that it's the biggest in the world. F— me dead! What the hell is so impressive about piling some disused steel beams up*

*like that?*

*Of course, a bird needs more than a nest. You have to feed it something. So they built it a birdbath, you know, the thing they call the Water Cube. And, already the bird's laid an egg, right there on Chang'an Avenue in Central Beijing. Yeah, the bastard's laid that titanium blob they call the Grand National Theatre. It's for the birds, and they're all built by a pack of traitors. . . . On the radio I heard that the foreign devil who designed the egg claimed he wanted to cut China off from its traditional culture so that it could create new things. . . . Take a look at the Olympic Mascots: creatures designed by traitors to encourage mindless compliance. . . . If these bastards could really turn Beijing into a bird, one that could take off and fly, one that traveled the world taking whatever it wanted, I wouldn't be complaining. Just look at the Americans. They have an eagle on their national emblem. But these bastards of Beijing don't have the guts, or the ability.*

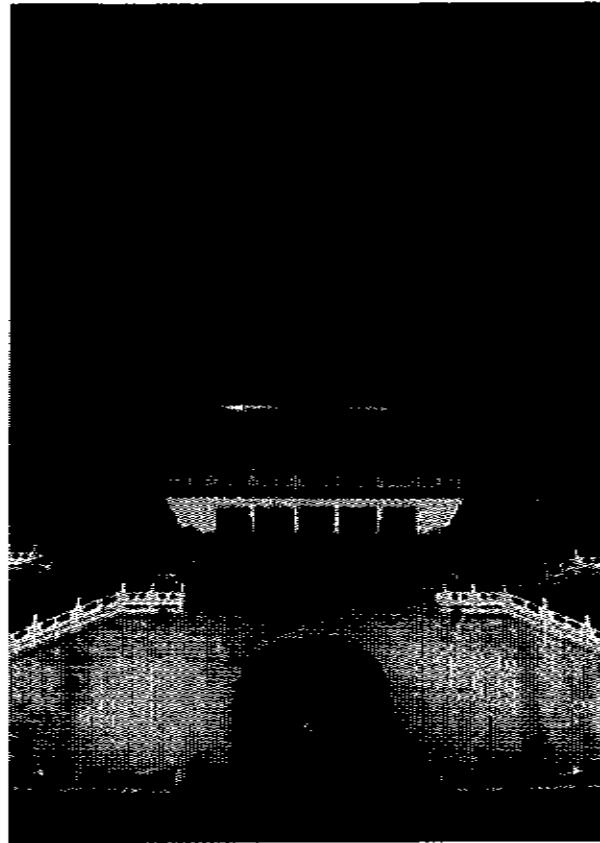
While we have heard much from the “angry young youths” (*fenqing*) of China over the Tibetan debacle and the international gauntlet of the Olympic Torch Relay, it is the “grumpy old men” of Beijing who give voice to a more complex and aggrieved state of mind. The rulers are in cahoots with international capital, and they lack the daring and ambition to make China into a superpower that will really awe the rest of the world. These sentiments reflect a frustration with continued poverty, a fury that China is not more assertive on the international stage and an ill-focused impatience. Some people would claim that they can detect here a lingering “Boxer mindset.”

After the disaster of the Boxer Rebellion, more enlightened counsels once more graced the Qing imperial court. A delegation of court advisers traveled the world and drew up an agenda for a “new politics” (*xinzheng*) for the empire, a belated reform approved by the Empress Dowager. Among other changes, the ancient imperial examination system was abandoned in favor of a system that would produce a modern technocratic bureaucracy, and an up-to-date bicameral parliament was to be established under a constitutional monarchy.

As a result of these decisions, the old examination halls were demolished and the foundations of the new parliament house were laid. A German company based in China was commissioned to produce a design for a parliament building that would reflect the modernizing aspirations of the newly enlightened monarchy. Work on the building began in earnest in 1909, but the royal parliament itself remained stillborn: The dynasty collapsed following the October 1911 revolution and was replaced by Dr. Sun Yat-sen's unstable Republic of China. Meanwhile, in 1915, the same group of German architects was asked to redesign the Qianmen Gate, the main entrance to the Inner City of Beijing. Although the city walls were demolished in the 1950s and the area surrounding Qianmen has been obliterated to create a theme-park “heritage shopping street” for the Olympics, the gate itself has survived. It still boasts the Western motifs that were added to turn the feudal relic into a building worthy of a modern, democratic country.

Once upon a time, Chinese reformers looked to democracy, to parliament buildings, to a revived politics and society. We can see it in what they chose to build. It therefore should give us pause that

the landmark buildings in Beijing today, designed by leading international architects in the recent years of China's Party-led authoritarian reform, are an office tower for the Communist Party-controlled Central TV network, and a national theatre that featured as its opening-night performance the revolutionary ballet *Red Detachment of Women*, the same ballet that Mao's wife Jiang Qing used to entertain Richard and Patricia Nixon during their historical 1972 visit to the Chinese capital. One doubts that Richard Nixon's tender heartstrings were plucked by that particular ballet. The carefully staged performances readied for the Beijing Olympics and the grand buildings of the new Chinese capital should also give us serious pause for thought.



*Qianmen Gate, Beijing [credit: Getty Images]*

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1. See my "Forching the Relay" ([thechinabeat.blogspot.com](http://thechinabeat.blogspot.com)).