



The Aesthetics of the Visual Spectacle in the Opening Ceremony of Beijing Olympics

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Abstract

The term ‘spectacle’ originally refers to something that is impressive or shocking to look at. Within its artistic evolution, spectacle has become a term of art since its appropriation in English drama from the 17th century. This study uses the theories of spectacle to explore the aesthetic values entailed in the spectacular presentation of the three rituals in the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics. The first ritual is the performance of the Fou drum which serves as the welcome ceremony in the event. It reappropriates the historical artifact “Fou” as an important prop, coupled with massive group performance, to create visually striking effects. Meanwhile, the magic presentation of the Olympic Rings relies heavily on the extensive application of various technologies, for example, using the wireless lighting system to control the LEDs which are attached on the surface of the Rings to emit light during the process of display. The deployment of the techniques and technologies in this section render it possible to have a three-dimensional and magic display of the Olympic Rings, which emerges as an unusual appearance that is exciting to watch. Also, the torch-lighting ceremony embodies perfect blend of culture and creativity, no matter in the design of the Olympic torch which is seen to contain traditional cultural elements like the auspicious images of clouds and colour red, or the implementation of the torch-igniting scheme, which undoubtedly becomes an extraordinary visual spectacle in the opening ceremony. When considered in the light of visual culture studies, the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics, by presenting such large amount of images, would undoubtedly produce unexpected and unprecedented visual impact on the audience. It is argued that, as an event that highlights culture and creativity, the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics integrates traditional Chinese culture into these rituals and tries

to present them in creative ways. The spectacle created therein is characterized by a unique artistic appeal and a distinctive artistic style. As such, the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics, as one of the great magnificent works of art in the history of modern Olympic Games, not only creates to the audience extraordinary visual pleasure and powerful visual effect through the production of the magnificent visual spectacle.

Keywords: Cultural Essence, Modern Technologies, Spectacular Presentations, Striking Effects, Aesthetic Values

Introduction

The opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics had successfully presented a series of spectacular scenes, namely the performance of the Fou drum, the display of the Olympic Rings and the lighting ceremony of the Olympic torch. The presentations of the spectacle had produced striking effects to impress the whole world and meanwhile created sorts of aesthetic feelings in the perceptions of the viewers through the spectacle. Spectacle is something demanded a close study in the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics. As developed by Guy Debord in his book *The Society of the Spectacle*, the term spectacle can be defined at two levels. To be specific, spectacle, in the general sense, is referred to as “the autocratic reign of the market economy which had acceded to an irresponsible sovereignty, and the totality of new techniques of government which accompanied the reign” (Debord II), while the limited sense of the term subsumes it into the category of mass media, referring to “its most glaring superficial manifestation” (14). The paper focuses on the limited sense of the term to delve into the aesthetic significance of the visual spectacle presented in the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics, exploring how the integration of cultural essence with modern advanced

technologies makes possible the demonstration of refined and sublimated visual scenes to constitute a new form of modern aesthetic art which supplants the deep-lying role of the traditional art by supplying a sort of visualized shock. A survey has found that there has existed numerous researches on this epoch-making event. Cai Handan draws on the theory of systemic functional linguistics developed by the English linguist Michael Halliday to analyse eight pieces of English news reports and articles taken from such sources as *China Daily*, *Official Website of the Chinese Olympic Committee* and *The New York Times*. Yu Lixia in her master's thesis argues that China intends to showcase the world its national image through the event, and thus symbolic expressions are needed to achieve the goal. Also, Wu Jing is her article entitled "The Aesthetics of Spectacle in the Opening Ceremony of Beijing Olympics" (translation mine) points out that the event is characterized by a grand tableau, harmonious and flowing performances by large-scale performing groups, and many more features, which contributes to create such spectacular scenes, striking images, impressive performances and stunning effects. Francesca R. Sborgi Lawson uses such concepts as liminality, functionality and mediatisation to describe the features demonstrated in the event. In Francesca's re-thinking of the event, the term "liminality" in the context is referred to as the integration of music and ritual usually appears in the ancient practice now is made into full play in this modern mediatized stage event, which Francesca calls as something liminal. A brief review of the existing literature has shown that some research has tried to look at the event from the perspective of aesthetics. Based on this earlier research, this paper analyses the spectacular presentations in the event, specifically focuses on the combination of the cultural essence and modern media

technologies which has rendered it possible the production of the visual spectacle. An analysis of representative spectacular scenes, combined with contemporary Chinese and Western stage art theories, helps remap, re-think and re-interpret the aesthetic values of the visual spectacle presented created therein. In so doing, the paper hopes to achieve its own peculiar critical insights on the manifestations of the spectacle.

What is Aesthetics?

Hegel talks of the quality of artwork in his book *Aesthetics: Volume 1*:

Thus art on its sensuous side deliberately produces only a shadow-world of shapes, sounds, and sights; and it is quite out of question to maintain that, in calling works of art into existence, it is from mere impotence and because of his limitations that man produces no more than a surface of the sensuous, mere schemata. These sensuous shapes and sounds appear in art not merely for the sake of themselves and their immediate shape, but with the aim, in this shape, of affording satisfaction to higher spiritual interests, since they have the power to call forth from all the depths of consciousness a sound and an echo in the spirit. In this way the sensuous aspect of art is spiritualized, since the spirit appears in art as made sensuous... But precisely for this reason an art product is only there in so far as it has taken its passage through the spirit and has arisen from spiritual productive activity. (39)

As Hegel puts it, the works of art arise from spiritual productive activities. Obviously, image cannot assume this task just by taking the functions of copy and documentary

photography. Spectacle is served as the subjective expression of the reality, so human beings can pour more imaginations and emotions into it to create the so-called imaginary objects. It should also be noted that spectacle does not work alone but works closely with documentary feature. What the spectacle creates is a kind of imaginary object, the constituent elements of which are derived from the real life and familiar to the people. The documentary elements in the spectacular images can make the distance between the audience and the images closer. Only in this way can the spectacular images perfectly project its imagination and creation.

In the 1930s, the German existentialist philosopher Heidegger predicted that we are heading into 'An Age of World Picture'. He said, "Understood in an essential way, 'world picture' does not mean 'picture of the world', but rather, the world grasped as picture" (Heidegger 82). As Heidegger points out, with the media revolution resulted from the extensive application of information technology and communication technology, the age of visual culture has arrived.

Malcolm Barnard, an international recognized theorist of visual culture, points out that "The final definition of the visual in visual culture to be dealt with here proposes that it is everything that can be seen which also has aesthetic intent. This is the idea that visual culture is anything that has been created or produced with the intentions of having some aesthetic effect" (16). In the age of visual culture, instead of focusing on information from books, newspapers or magazines, people tend to obtain information from the emerging electronic media such as movie, television, network, etc. This emerging electronic medium has led to the space liberalization which means the transmission of the information is no longer restricted to

temporal and spatial constraints. Instead of presenting abstract and profound languages, visual culture renders all kinds of images to people. Presenting such large amount of images to the masses would undoubtedly produce unprecedented visual impact. Indulged in these images, people refuse to enter into a deeper level of thinking, but are physiologically satisfied with the visual pleasure brought by the images. Thereby, visual culture is usually considered as a fast-food style sensual culture.

With the advent of the age of visual culture, the aesthetic approach has also shifted from “free-floating contemplation” to “casual recreation”. Generally speaking, the traditional aesthetic approach is contemplation, and with which the existing mode of the traditional arts is associated. Chinese traditional arts stress artistic conception and lingering appeal, while western arts are particular about aura. According to Walter Benjamin, aura is defined as “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be” (5). This provides hints that oriental arts and the western ones have too many similarities. To feel the beauty of the traditional arts, one needs to resort to contemplation. Just as Kant said:

When the form of an object (rather than what is material in its presentation, viz., in sensation) is judged in mere reflection on it (without regard to a concept that is to be acquired from it) to be the basis of a pleasure in such an object’s presentation, then the presentation of this object is also judged to be connected necessarily with this pleasure, and hence connected with it not merely for the subject apprehending this form but in general for everyone who judges [it]. The object is then called beautiful, and our ability to judge by such a pleasure (and hence also with universal validity) is called taste, for

the basis of the pleasure is posited merely in the form of the object for reflection in general, and hence not in a sensation of the object, nor with a reference to any concept that might involve some intention or other. (30)

The traditional arts leave a huge room for the appreciators' imagination. Whether appreciating the oriental ink paintings or the western oil paintings, people can attentively gaze at and contemplate on them for a long time. However, in the age of visual culture, the visual arts, taking movie and television as the representatives, do not leave any space for the spectators to imagine. Under such circumstances, contemplation as the approach of appreciation is no longer applicable. Benjamin says:

Let us compare the screen on which a film unfolds with the canvas of a painting. The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. It cannot be arrested. Duhamel, who detests the film and knows nothing of its significance, though something of its structure, notes this circumstance as follows: I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images. The spectators' process of association in view of these images is indeed interrupted by their constant, sudden change. This constitutes the shock effect of the film, which, like all shocks, should be cushioned by heightened presence of mind. By means of its technical structure, the film has taken the physical shock effect out of the wrappers in which Dadaism had, as it were, kept it inside the moral shock effect. (17)

The moving images rendered by modern electronic media succeed in producing extremely strong visual effects. The images are flowing so vivid that they constantly strike on the spectators as if they are facing the firing of bullets. The sense of distance existed in the traditional aesthetic mode has to be cancelled and recreation becomes the only appropriate mentality and aesthetic mode. As a modern aesthetic mode and in pursuit of zero-distance contact, the ultimate goal of recreation is not to abandon the spectators to contemplation, but to pursue the visual pleasure, entertainment and relaxation of the body and the mind of the spectators.

Aesthetics of the Visual Spectacle in the Opening Ceremony

Zhang Yimou (hereinafter referred to as “Zhang”), the general director of the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics, along with his capable team, had been dedicated to making the opening ceremony such a big success. Zhang, as one of the fifth-generation representatives of film directors in China who also enjoy tremendous reputation in the international community, has mastered skilfully the art of photography and been very good at using visual languages which are deemed as full of ethnic temperaments. This can be observed in his famous films such as *Red Sorghum* and *Raise the Red Lantern* as well as his later commercial blockbusters *Hero* and *House of Flying Draggers*. Moreover, Zhang is brilliant in deploying colours in his artistic production. He is not only famous for his capability of using different colour tones in his films – applying various colours in order to render special effects and reinforce the themes of the stories, but often makes use of colours metaphorically to indicate some sorts of allegories. The thick red in *Red Sorghum* is supposedly not

associated with the themes like happiness and celebration, but serves to convey a deep sense of tragedy. In the opening ceremony, he had succeeded in blending different colours to avoid too simple or too exaggerated scenes. And this style is known to be very popular amongst the elite-modernists. In so doing, it can prevent scenes with mixed and garish colours usually adopted by commercial multimedia shows like the Spring Festival gala in China from being generated. Cooler tone was preferred in the opening ceremony for the purpose of producing multimedia spectacle. When talking about the film *Hero*, Zhang exclaimed that, “Two years later, when you think of a particular film, you may forget the story line of it ... but I am thinking that, several years later when I talk with you about the film *Hero*, you will be able to remember only the colours” (Fang 41, translation mine).

The statement reveals that Zhang showed his confidence in rendering colours and shaping motion models in producing films. In the 1980s when the technology conditions for producing visual spectacle in films were still very insufficient, Zhang had tried to explore the possibility of making models which could engender remarkable classic visual spectacle. In addition, his ability to manage large-scale scenes and performances, to come up with sensational ideas and put them into practice in high quality turned out to be crucial to operate the opening ceremony successfully. From melodramas to commercial blockbusters, from stage plays to open-air performances, the cultural history of Zhang’s artistic career is exactly a history of visual spectacle which is seen always under evolution. Another key factor for presenting such extraordinary visual spectacle lies in the fact that modern advanced media technologies were widely used in the event, which were integrated with the philosophy, helping

to produce a unique style and special aura for the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics. The spectacular presentations have been highly and widely praised as “the masterpiece of artistic beauty” and “the epitome of Chinese culture” by the foreign media. In covering the event, the foreign media has been seen to frequently employ such adjectives as ‘spectacle’ or ‘spectacular’. To be specific, Agence France Presse (AFP) reported the event using a title as “Beijing’s Games kick off with spectacular opening ceremony” (“Beijing’s Games kick off”) and the coverage in BBC SPORT appeared as “BBC Sport looks back at the spectacular opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics...” (“2008 Beijing Olympics”).

Visual Spectacle One: The Magnificent Performance of the Fou Drum

The performance of the Fou drum served as the welcome ceremony in the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics. In order to achieve perfect acoustic and photoelectric effects, the performance was infused with a variety of the traditional Chinese cultural elements. In this sense, the Fou drum used as performing prop is a case in point. Fou, with round belly and lid, as well as ear-shaped handles, was used as wine vessel by the emperors in the royal feasts in the Spring and Autumn period in ancient China. Due to the fact that Fou is generally made of copper, when striking with a stick it can emit pleasant sound. As such, it was also used as a musical instrument, especially in the royal courts in ancient China, after a feast was served and singing and dancing performances were to be presented. Concluding from the above references, it can be observed that Fou was originally used both as a wine vessel as well as a percussion instrument in ancient China. During the Spring and Autumn period, people usually used copper

wares to serve wine to entertain the guests. When they became slightly drunken and pleasantly inebriated, they would start to strike the vessel with a stick to produce melodies while they were chanting. It was often used on the occasions of entertaining the distinguished guests from afar in the royal courts to express warm welcome to them. Tracing back to Xia and Shang dynasties in Chinese history, the equipment Fou was officially used to perform rituals with royal music in the background. Later it was taken as an indispensable instrument in the Confucian ritual ensemble, and it made its modern appearance in the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The scene unfolded as the 2008 performers stepped on the stage with a synchronous appearance, and then they started to strike on the surfaces of the Fou drums with the glowing red sticks. What is striking is that the specially designed equipment was equipped with white square-shaped LED arrays around their bodies, which enabled them to produce at once melodious music and a dazzling light, and also the some selected Chinese characters in tandem.



Fig. 1 The extravaganza of playing the Fou drum as a welcome ceremony (Source: Google)

While the performers were striking the equipment with a set of well-designed dance movements and chanting loudly in unison the popular quotes from *The Analects of Confucius*, “It is such a delight to have friends coming from afar”, and from which a strong sense of beauty was thus produced, which seemed to add a pleasant atmosphere to the performance. Besides showing a warm welcome to all the participants of the event, the beautiful melody produced from the Fou drums, alongside with the resounding chanting of the performers, all this had contributed to presenting a spectacular scene.

In fact, using the performance of the Fou drums as a welcome ceremony in the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics has had a profound cultural background. The general director of the ceremony Zhang confessed that the performance was highly creative in its form, content and style. He said, “After making a survey, we discovered that there are a lot of similarities in the welcome ceremonies of the previous Olympic Games, as always presented in the form of playing a video clip in the beginning and followed by the cheers of the audience. Based on the previous experiences, our team had worked hard enough to bring forward some new ideas on the subject. In the end, we decided to use the performance of playing the Fou drums both as a way of countdown as well as a welcome ceremony” (“Special Interview with Zhang Yimou”, translation mine).

In order to come out with a better way to implement the plan, it is reported that the designers of this part had spent a lot of time in the libraries and Online to check the available references pertaining to the proposal. They had even consulted with the archaeologists for relevant suggestions and advice. After having grasped considerable knowledge of the Fou drum, the designers’ focus was on

the exterior look of the equipment, attempting to restore its historical look for its modern appearance.

The welcome ceremony was carried out by 2008 performers with 2008 pieces of the Fou drums. Undoubtedly, such grand scene characterized by massive group performance and harmonious and graceful dance movements had deeply impressed the world. The spectacular performance was surely very unforgettable and will be remembered for ever by the world. And interestingly, the number of the performers and the Fou drums was arranged deliberately as 2008 to correspond to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and thus producing its metaphorical implications. Apart from this, large-scale performances in the event also included the one rendered by 3000 performers who were cast as Confucius's disciples. When they were marching in unison into the venue in files with bamboo slips in hands, and chanting the famous quotes from *The Analects of Confucius*, the performance of playing the Fou drums was still going on with certain rhythms. At the same time, it could be seen that there were 32 lofty long pillars which usually symbolize the majestic palaces of ancient China steadily rising up. Amidst the singing and dancing of the performers wearing beautiful ethnic costumes, the participants of the event must be overwhelmed by such astonishing visual and aural effects. Moreover, the singing and dancing extended, on the one hand, Chinese's people's warm welcome to friends from all over the world, and on the other hand, also expressed their good wishes to the prosperity of their motherland, or broadly speaking, to a harmonious human world.

It is known to all that China is good at organizing massive group performances. As such, it is not surprising to see that there were so many large-scale group

performances in the opening ceremony. In actual operation, it is difficult to coordinate the gestures and movements of the performers in such huge group performances. However, the performers had showed such surprising unbelievable harmony in gestures and movements in their performances in the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics. That is to say, such perfect coordination was achieved in the performances to showcase the world alternative aesthetic style. In an interview, Zhang revealed that “I always make joke with them (referring to the westerners) that the performances of the Chinese people are the second best in the world ...What I mean by saying this is that the performances are in such harmonious rhythms that they help produce a strong sense of beauty amongst the spectators. We Chinese people can do this” (“Zhang Yimou Deciphered”, translation mine). Zhang insisted that it was the combination of the oriental culture known as collectivism and the western one known as technologism which worked together to produce such spectacular scenes on the one hand; and on the other, in his logic of dialectics, Zhang has tried to achieve the connections between these visual cultural phenomena and the manifestation of the cultural modernity in a globalized world.

Visual Spectacle Two: The Miraculous Display of the Olympic Rings

Talking about unforgettable moments in the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics, the display of the Olympic Rings must be an indispensable one. Observations on the previous Olympic Games, both contrasts and similarities can be brought out. For instance, in the 2000 Sydney Olympics, the performers, holding the flags printed with the images of the Olympic Rings, were running around the

performance venue riding the horses. In this way, their performance formed the shape of the Five Olympic Rings. In the 2004 Athens Olympics, a big pool was constructed at the centre of the performance venue and a flamewas shot into the water to inflame the Olympic Rings which were placed under the water. The confluence of flame and water had formed a beautiful scene which implied the revival of the tradition of the Greek, since water has been an indispensable thing accompanying the lives of the Greek. After a brief review on the presentation of the Olympic Rings in the previous Olympic Games, at this point, one many ask a question as “How are the Olympic Rings displayed at the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics?” For that matter, it is hoped that the following analysis will serve to represent the actual picture of the matter.



Fig. 2 The dreamlike scene created by the three-dimensional display of the Olympic Rings (Source: Google)

Although faced with tremendous difficulties and great challenges, Zhang and his team did not give up thinking about good ideas for the display of the Olympic Games. In practice, this part started by setting off the fireworks which were blooming like beautiful flowers in

the night sky of Beijing and then formed quickly into 29 giant footprints. The 29 footprints here were taken to symbolize the footprints of the previous 29 Olympic Games which were held before the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The footprints continued to move along the central corridor in Beijing city, cross the Tian'anmen Square, and approach the Beijing National Stadium which functioned as the main venue to host the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. After arriving at the Beijing National Stadium, the images of footprints were slowly transformed into a galaxy of stars, and then the stars descended from the sky down to the ground and were turned into shining "Dream Rings". Simultaneously, in the sky of Beijing there suddenly emerged a lot of flying fairies, adding dramatically dreamy aura to the atmosphere. The application of the flying fairies in the opening ceremony was reportedly inspired by the images of the flying fairies in the murals of Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang city of Gansu Province in China. Taken as the logo of Mogao Grottoes, the images of the flying fairies have become immortal works of art in the world cultural heritage. In the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics, the flying fairies were seen clustering around the Dream Rings to create romantic atmosphere in the stadium, causing the audience to feel like being immersed in a fairy-tale world. Following up this, the five-interlaced Olympic Rings were slowly lifted up from the ground and then presented as a three-dimensional image in the mid-air of the stadium, a stunning display to arouse cheers and screams from the audience. Then, the Beijing National Stadium became very bright all of a sudden owing to the white light emitting from the Rings, dreamlike and fantastic. Under such circumstances, the stadium was shining brightly as if millions of stars were sparkling on earth. Here and now, the beautiful flying

fairies were singing and dancing amidst the shining stars, creating a beautiful and romantic scene like being in the dreamlike world. After a while, the beautiful flying fairies jointly lifted up the shining Rings to the sky, lighting up the night sky of Beijing and thus igniting the passion of every person who embraces peace, friendship and the Olympic Games.

Admittedly, the scene combining the display of the Dream Rings and the flying fairies in the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics has become a classic instant and an eternal memory in the history of the Olympic Games, as an echo to the idea of “High-tech Olympics”. So, it seems that it is necessary to take into consideration several questions in relation to this dreamlike moment. Questions can be posed as follows: Firstly, how was the Dream Rings produced? Secondly, what made the Dream Rings fly up to the sky? Apparently, the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics was a huge project, so lots of work, like arrangement, organization, operation, etc., needed to be done. In particular, it was very crucial to handle these matters related to light, colour, the background, the stage configuration, the selection of background music, the sequential arrangement of the shows, etc., in workable and effective fashions and by the application of advanced technology, and thus aiming to convey better the important information involved in it. Zhang had recommended the technology of wireless lighting control. The technology demanded, in the first place, to attach LEDs on the surface of the Rings to turn it into a huge net with a broad surface. Therefore, the large steel net, with 36 meters length and 16.5 meters width, was wrapped in black to set as a foil to the crystal appearance of the Rings. And this wire mesh weighed some 800 kg but only with a thickness of 40 cm. meanwhile, the crossbars

on it needed to be fixed at the upper and lower ends of the net to help lift it vertically up in the performance. Besides, the installing of four pieces of wires was required on the upper sides of crossbars for the purpose of upholding the giant net when it was lifted upwards, so preventing it from falling down.



Fig. 3 A three-dimensional image of the Olympic Rings appearing above the Beijing National Stadium (Source: Google)

More importantly, four large batteries and twelve wireless receivers used for light control were embedded on the upper ends of the crossbars. As such, 450,000 chips could obtain power through the dry batteries and receive information from the central system. At the same time, the wireless receivers were endowed with the capacity of adjusting the lighting, for example, turning the light from bright to dim, or from dim to bright. This was an essential design for the stage lighting in the opening ceremony. It has been noted that the design of these small receivers played a decisive role in the display of the Olympic Rings, so did the wireless lighting controls. In addition, in order to make sure the light could converge on the central part of

the stage to help the Rings stand there like something magical, there were also 50,000 LED beads to be applied at the centre of the performance stage, so the whole process of presentation could be operated by the remote control system.

Visual Spectacle Three: A Creative Way of Igniting the Olympic Torch

The climax of the opening ceremony in any Olympic Games must be the part of igniting the Olympic torch. It is always considered as a sacred moment, as the Olympic flame is called the holy flame of the Olympics Games which needs to be carried around the world before reaching the place where the Games will be held. After that, the flame will keep on burning in the main stadium throughout the whole activity. It has become a conventional belief that the flame of Olympics symbolizes brightness, solidarity, friendship, peace and justice. The holy flame has its origin in the ancient Greek myths and legends. In order to save human beings who had suffered hunger and coldness, the ancient Greek god Prometheus stole the power of fire from the other gods and endowed humans with autonomy to control it. The torch relay and flame-lighting ceremony of the modern Olympics first appeared in the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics. From then on, it has become an important tradition and symbol of the Olympics. The flame-lighting ceremony is the highlight of the opening ceremony in Modern Olympic Games. In accordance with the ritual manuals and regulations of the Olympics, the flame-lighting section is usually the most exciting and attractive part in the opening ceremony. Therefore, how to ignite the flame of the torch in the main stadium of the hosting place has become a focal point attracting a lot of attention in every Olympic Games. Looking back on the

history of the Olympic Games, there have been numerous unforgettable moments of igniting the flame of the Olympic torch. For example, shooting an arrow to set the fire to the Olympic torch in the 1992 Barcelona Olympics has been acclaimed as a creative act. The Spanish archer Antonio Rebollo at first kindled the arrow and then shot it into the cauldron. The burning arrow there upon initiated the burning on the seven-storey-high cauldron, which is seen as one of the most innovative moments in the history of the Olympic Games. Further, since the 1996 Atlanta Olympics was timed to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the modern Olympic Games. Hence, the worldwide icon Muhammad Ali, the former American professional boxer who has become a worldwide icon, was invited to perform the task of igniting the torch. Ali at that time was suffering severe Parkinsonism, but with a strong will he overcame the difficulties and satisfactorily completed the glorious mission of igniting the torch for the 1996 Atlanta Olympics. When Ali was igniting the torch with trembling hands, the audience was awestruck by their hero's spirit and gave their tribute to the hero by cheering loudly.

In addition, the flame-lighting ceremony of the 2000 Sydney Olympics has been praised as the most romantic one in the history of the Olympic Games. The cauldron was lit by Aboriginal athlete Cathy Freeman. Two elements from the torch concept, fire and water, were replicated in the design of the cauldron. Freeman stood atop a pool of water and lit the flame of the cauldron which was instantly burning brightly and forming a circle by which Freeman was surrounded. And then the burning flame rose slowly from under the surface and continued to spread to the top of the stadium. The scene that Freeman in a silver waterproof suit stood under a waterfall-like

cauldron was supposed to be unique and impressive. However, the flame-lighting ceremony in the 2004 Athens Olympics adopted the original practice which meant to pay salute to the Olympic Games which has undergone through many vicissitudes in its over one century development history. In this Olympic Games, first of all, the cauldron was seen to be slowly placed down, and after being ignited it was slowly lifted up to a standing position. This simple way of lighting the flame has been often interpreted as sign indicating the returning of the Olympics to its original state which lays emphasis on the connections between heaven and earth, and between materials and spirits. After making a close and comparative study, it is concluded that there are different fashions to implement the Torch-lighting Ceremony in every Olympic Games. As such, the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics had successfully implemented an alternative fashion of lighting the Olympic torch.

Firstly, an innovative proposal for the design of the Olympic torch was put into study by the designer. For that matter, Zhang and his team had made great efforts to design a distinctive torch for the Beijing Olympic Games. They, inspired by avant-garde design of the Beijing National Stadium, took the bowl-shaped and roofless brim on the top of the Stadium as a scroll. And then they applied this design to make torches for the Beijing Olympics. Exquisite patterns were seen to imprint on the torch which gave the name to the torch as “The Torch-Lucky Clouds”, for the images of the auspicious clouds were engraved on it.

In Chinese culture, the auspicious clouds are widely applied as symbols of the Chinese cultural essence, and its conception in relation to culture has had a history of more than thousand years in China. This is the cultural root of

the design of the Beijing Olympic torch. Apart from being imprinted auspicious clouds in its upper part, the rest of the torch was applied with red colour which was popular in Han dynasty of China. The silver colour of the auspicious clouds on the torch made a contrast with the red colour of Han dynasty. And the combination of the two colours made the torch look unique. Moreover, the logo of the auspicious clouds and the three-dimensional design had endowed the torch with qualities of elegance, nobility and profundity. It is more remarkable that the torch designed for the 2008 Beijing Olympics used clean fuel, namely propane as its fuel. This kind of fuel allows the burning time of the torch to last 15 minutes at least, and in the condition of zero wind speed, the height of the flame can reach a maximum of 30cm. Also, this kind of fuel enables the torch to keep the fire burning even under the condition of strong wind and heavy rain. The aluminum alloys with light weight and high quality as well as the technology of hollow plastic design were made use of in the making of the Beijing Olympics' torch. And the lower part of the torch was sprayed with high-touch plastic paint so to make it comfortable when holding the torch in hand and preventing it from slipping out of the holder's hand.

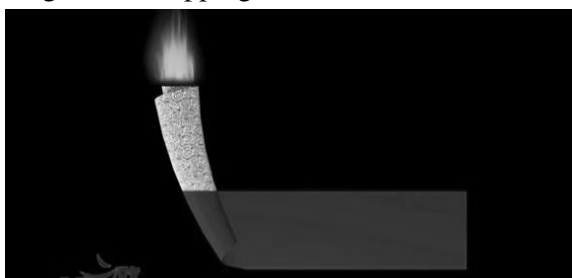


Fig. 4 The Beijing Olympic torch imprinted with the image of auspicious clouds and the unique combination of colour red and silver (Source: Google)

All in all, the opening ceremony is the most important part in the Olympic Games, and the torch-lighting ceremony is the most important part in the opening ceremony. As Zhang said, "If the opening ceremony is satisfactorily completed, then it indicates that the Olympic Games have been half successfully done. In this sense, a successful torch-lighting ceremony implies a good beginning of the Olympic Games" ("Special Interview with Zhang Yimou", translation mine). Through detailed study and strict verification, the team at last decided to invite Li Ning, a Chinese retired gymnast who has enjoyed the title of "Prince of Gymnastics", to assume the task of igniting the Olympic torch. In the actual operation, Li Ning was lifted by a computer-controlled wire tied to his waist up to the brim of the stadium, which is measured as 500 metre long and 14metre wide. After hanging beside the brim for a while, Li Ning started to run ahead at full tilt in parallel with the brim. Li Ning was running on an imaginary track which was set deliberately above the stadium near the brim of the stadium. While he was running along, the surface of the brim was projected with the videos relating to the previous Olympic torch relays around the world, covering a record distance of some 137,000 km in 129 days. In this sense, the brim was turned into a scroll which normally bears some sorts of images. On the scroll-like brim, the audience was provided a chance to look into the entire development process of the modern Olympic Games. The unfolding of the scroll synchronized with Li Ning's running. When arriving at the top of the stadium, Li Ning stopped in front of a large fuse which was connected with a colossal torch placed on the brim of the stadium. Li Ning, at this solemn moment, reached out the burning small torch in his hand to ignite the fuse of the large torch which, within two seconds, burst

into flames, which was growing high and higher to light up the whole stadium and adorn the night sky of Beijing city.



Fig. 5 The Olympic torch successfully ignited and the flame lighting up the night sky of Beijing City (Source: Google)

In this operation, it has been noted that nearly 3000 units of the computer lights were put into full play inside the stadium to meet the need of artistic lighting and modelling stereoscopically and comprehensively. In particular, more than 140 high-powered projectors were also put into use to enable the moving images and video images to be flexibly projected on the performance stages, and meanwhile large props were introduced into the performances. Also, the bowl-shaped brim with super specifications was used as a circular screen, while 63 sets of large digital projectors and 21 sets of images were spliced together to perform their functions in some selected areas. The application of large digital projectors combined with matching and splicing technologies were dedicated to

enhancing the effects of performances. Sha Xiaolan, the chief lighting designer of the opening ceremony, said, “ ... the artistic effects of lighting need to meet the requirements of the higher aesthetic pursuit ... and the design of lighting is inextricably integrated with the stage arrangements (“Sha Xiaolan, the Chief Designer of Lighting”, translation mine).

Sha’s statement reveals the importance of the integration of the performances with modern media technologies, and lighting technology is one of them which had facilitated the presentations of the programmes to a higher quality, while on the other hand traditional cultural elements were showcased to the world more effectively and vividly. And more importantly, producing spectacular scenes would not be possible without the aid of these modern mediatized techniques. It was this combination that made the Olympic flame lighting in the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics a spectacular presentation – an incomparable achievement bound to have its distinctive inscription in the history of the Modern Olympic Games.

Conclusion

China took the opportunity of hosting the 2008 Olympic Games to showcase the world its national strength and image, its profound culture and age-old civilization, etc. In this sense, the activity has become an important business card used by China for marketing itself. And the liminal integration of indigenous Chinese elements and the Western performance theories has produced sorts of modern mediatized performances. The spectacular nature entailed in these modern mediatized performances, as demonstrated in the three ritual performances –

specifically, playing the Fou drum, displaying the Olympic Rings and igniting the Olympic torch – has clearly exemplified the role of marketing that the opening ceremony has performed. The spectacle produced in this modern ritual performance in the opening ceremony is an echo to the contemporary consumer culture and commodity fetishism prevalent in a consumer society. Guy Debord argues in his seminal book *The Society of the Spectacle* that “In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation” (1). Guy Debord notes the central importance of mass media technologies in producing the spectacle and highlights the role of mass media marketing in spreading these spectacular images. The opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics is a paradigmatic form of modern large-scale artistic performance and commercial activity. It has elaborately produced a series of spectacular images and successfully presented them as commodity-images which has induced, amongst the spectator who consume them, waves of fervent exaltation equivalent to the ecstasies of the religious fanatics. The spectator is often drugged by the spectacular representations, resulting in the obstruction of their genuine interactions in social life. In his analysis of a spectacular society, Debord realizes that the authentic social life has been supplanted by its presentation, which is characteristic of a modern consumer society. The spectacular opening ceremony involved using spectacular images to convey complex messages, which has affected the spectators’ perceptions on the concerned subjects. The fascinating use of the spectacular images in the opening ceremony has reaffirmed the symbolic significance of the images in a consumer society, in which relations between

commodities have replaced the relations between people. As Debord says in his fourth thesis, “The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images” (1). As thus, the construction and representation of the spectacles is in the opening ceremony is a conventional practice of mass media to disseminate information. As such, it has reached its aims as helping the views fully understand the complex messages disseminated through this modern mediated representation, and also as disclosing social problematics such as the phenomenon of social alienation, a lack of authentic human interactions, the degradation of human life quality, etc., which have been resulted by the spectacular nature of a consumer society. In summary, the aesthetic values, social considerations and humanistic concerns constitute multi-dimensional critical perspectives to rethink the spectacular representations in the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics.

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