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The Beijing Olympics Flag-Raising Ceremony &

Chinese Propaganda as Actively Molding Public Conceptions of Tibet

Tibet's absorption into the People's Republic of China—abbreviated PRC—has proven tumultuous from the start. As a region with an already contested global identity and nationhood (Lopez 1998; Heberer 2001), contemporary Tibetan culture and identity have developed under the influence of various Chinese political and military sovereignties since at least the 1950s (Schwartz 1994; Barnett 2006). Despite the occupation's violent tendencies, Chinese media has encouraged the view that the Chinese Communist Party's actions in Tibet are justified and peaceful (Powers 2004; White Papers; *Red River Valley*, 1997). The 2008 Beijing Olympics produced a keystone moment in Chinese propaganda by addressing Tibet within the greater context of Chinese nationhood, and demonstrating this preferred understanding of China's Tibet. The Flag-Raising Ceremony specifically, a part of the opening ceremonies, illustrates how the People's Republic of China hoped to be seen by both their own citizens and the international community at large. In this paper I argue that the ceremony addressed Tibet's situation in a manner which erased negative relations, and in their place created a notion of Tibet as one of the many ethnic groups which fit seamlessly—even harmoniously—into Han Chinese society. This image of a unified PRC not only grossly oversimplified Tibetan culture in the context of a myriad of ethnic groups, but also presented Tibetan culture as inferior to China's.

The flag-raising ceremony at the Beijing Olympics was impeccably rehearsed, flawlessly performed, and a generally impressive production. A young girl sang in Mandarin, dressed in the

same shade of bright red that colors the Chinese flag. The entire room, full of spectators, glowed the same crimson. A group of smiling children wearing a diverse assortment of costumes hurried out across the floor bearing the enormous flag of the People's Republic of China—a solid red rectangle decorated with a sprinkling of five golden stars in the upper left corner. The children—clearly meant to represent the variety of indigenous cultures within China, judging by their distinctive costumes—scurried across the floor as the music continued. They approached two lines of three men dressed in military attire, and handed the flag off to them. In perfect synchronization, the six men lifted the flag and marched forward with emphatic military precision. All the while, the music rose in epic crescendos, and the little girl smiled up at the huge audience. Before the effects of this demonstration can be understood as definitive propaganda, the PRC's relationship with Tibet must be drawn out.

By 2008, a long history already existed between the two nations. To narrow it down to their most relevant interactions, Chinese invasion and occupation of Tibet began in 1950 (Lopez 1998:157). After the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, the new Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping began to relax Mao's rigid policies regarding Tibet, offering the region more cultural and religious freedom (Smith 2008:165). Deng confidently promised to reduce the number of Han Chinese in Tibet by a huge percentage, mainly because the Chinese government was sure it had "convinced Tibetans of the superstitious and counterrevolutionary nature of Tibetan Buddhism," (Smith 2008:165). To his surprise, the relaxing of oppressive policies led to "dramatic revival of Tibetan religion and culture" along with new enthusiastic Tibetan nationalism centered on its rebuilt and repopulated monasteries. This cultural revival along with numerous riots and demonstrations led the Chinese government to move away from any kind of Tibetan autonomy plan (Smith

2008:165); meaning, of course, that policies banning displays of Tibetan culture and religion were reenacted, and the number of Han Chinese within Tibet did not decrease as promised.

In 1996, China instituted a “Patriotic Education Campaign” in order to boost Chinese patriotism and party support after the violent suppression of democratic protests at Tiananmen Square in Beijing (Smith 2008:170). In Tibet, “the purpose of the campaign was to transform Tibetan national identity into Chinese identity, to eradicate Tibetans’ loyalty to the Dalai Lama, and to cultivate Tibetan loyalty to China instead” (Smith 2008:170). With the campaign came a new system of compulsory education. The required texts essentially prescribed a new account of Chinese occupation in Tibet. These texts claimed that Tibet’s union with China was “inevitable” and that the preservation of their “unity” was necessary to Tibet’s future “development and prosperity” (Smith 2008:173-4). One of the books explains that China is ultimately “a unitary nation of many nationalities that have voluntarily united in a spirit of friendliness and cooperation to create a big family of the motherland,” (Smith 2008:174). In this context, Tibetans are lumped together with numerous other ethnic minorities as one of the many only slightly different natives who have come together to form the People’s Republic of China. The PRC’s White Papers, a number of government documents released in the early 2000s, also claim that “Tibet has been an inseparable part of China since ancient times” and refer to the 1950 invasion of Tibet as a “peaceful liberation” from an “imperialist aggressor” that contributed to China’s greater “national democratic revolution against imperialism and feudalism in modern history” (PRC 2009:1). In this context, Tibet is explained to have begun as a “society of feudal serfdom under theocratic rule, a society which was even darker than medieval society in Europe” (PRC 2009:1). In all these renditions of history, China posits Tibet as not only backwards and in need of guidance and help,

but as inherently connected to China, so that the fight for independence that emerged in Tibet stops making sense. This is the PRC's angle, what they push for "Tibetans to believe about their own history, about Tibet's relationship with China, about the supposed evils of Tibetan independence," (Smith 2008:170).

Whether or not the Beijing Olympics flag-raising ceremony was a form of propaganda is hardly in dispute. As Anne-Marie Brady points out (2009:8), the same man chosen to head the Beijing Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games, Liu Peng, was also deputy director of the Central Propaganda Department from 1997 to 2002. China had lost its Olympic bid a previous year due to "perceived image problems," so hosting the 2008 Olympics became "a golden opportunity to re-shape China's national image," (Brady 2009:8). The PRC openly refers to its propaganda as just that, and in fact divides it into two categories: that meant for internal viewership, which targets Chinese citizens; and that "targeted at foreigners in China, Overseas Chinese and the outside world in general," (Brady 2009:9). The aspects of Olympic propaganda meant to influence foreign viewership focused on cultural and economic themes meant to "allay international fears about China's increasing economic and military power," but at the same time project an awareness of its "renewed strength and prosperity," (Brady 2009:9). These goals may seem contradictory, but both are effectively demonstrated through the song and costumes that display a kind of citizen serenity just underneath a strong military front.

According to Brady (2009:12), the need to demonstrate military might has its roots in the post-Cold War era, during which "China felt increasingly challenged by successive American administrations' international promotion of 'democracy,' through force if necessary." Thus the military aspect of the performance seems to be part of the show for international audiences. On

the other hand, Brady claims (2009:10) features of the performance meant to affect its Chinese audience as a form of propaganda were “designed to gain popular consent for the continuance of CCP rule and to build national pride.” As she puts it, (Brady 2009:11) the Olympics just provided a grand opportunity for expanding ongoing efforts to “to educate the Chinese public to embrace” the values necessary for this “New China,” such as “innovation, industry, civil obedience and national unity.” Rather than celebrate revolution or radical social reform as it had in the past, the goal of the PRC’s internally focused propaganda was to promote social unity and cohesion as seen among the diversely outfitted group of children who deliver the flag to the men in military uniform (Brady 2009:11).

So, while the PRC’s international Olympic slogans read “One world, one dream,” and “New Beijing, New Olympics,” its domestic slogans read “Welcome to the Olympics, be civilized and follow the new trend,” and “I participate, I contribute and I am happy,” (Brady 2009:11-12). The PRC’s domestic slogans seem to function to incite its citizens with good behavior and an affinity towards the central government. Internationally, however, China utilized its propaganda to project an image of austere military strength and formidable unity. One reference was made to ruler Deng Xiaoping’s advice to the Chinese people to put the past behind them and “look to the future” as a way to “deal with the pain of earlier eras,” but it is unclear which audience this was more geared towards (Brady 2009:20). The opening ceremonies of the Beijing Olympics, including the flag-raising ceremony described earlier, were clearly propagandistic; apparently they were effective too. A 2008 Pew Survey “announced that 86 per cent of Chinese people were satisfied with their country’s development” whereas in 2004 only 42 per cent of Chinese people had “agreed with this sentiment” (Brady 2009:23).

One of the most salient aspects of the ceremony's imagery of Tibetans is that China's ethnic minorities, including Tibetans, are represented by children. Generally speaking, there is a "a patriarchal kinship myth" which "pervades the official Chinese descriptions of the relationship between the Han-Chinese and minorities," (Heberer 2001:126). The Han, China's ethnic majority, "are described as father figures or elder brothers" who have the "task of educating the children and younger siblings," or ethnic minorities, a theme common in Confucianism (Heberer 2001:127). Han nationalism tends to posit theirs as the "most advanced culture" and so a kind of "father ethnic group" that is superior to others (Heberer 2001:127). It is argued, therefore, that the Han should protect, educate, and instruct the other members of its "family," or China's ethnic minorities, who are positioned in this framework as children who are "expected to be loyal and to respect the father," (Heberer 2001:127). Confucian ideology says that "no egalitarian concepts existed, because no two things were equal," (Heberer 2001:114). In practice this meant no two people were equal because "one was always older, male, or more highly ranked," and this way of thinking further extended over to the Chinese empire its relations to ethnic minorities. Though Confucianist thought did not prescribe destroying "barbarian" or inferior cultures, it did demand their subordination to the empire, and aimed to "cultivate" them through Confucian values "through nonviolent cultural assimilation," which is essentially what the People's Republic of China calls its interactions with Tibet (Heberer 2001:116).

Within Confucianism, the image of the young boy "represents... patrilineal continuation" (Wicks 2002:10). The individuality of the child is not significant; rather, "it was the future role of the child as provider for aged parents and preserver of the patriline that mattered" (Wicks 2002:27). In terms of Tibetan identity, this holds a complicated mess of implications and

meanings. First it implies a continuity or familial connection between Han Chinese and Tibetans as well as other ethnic minorities within the PRC. By representing its ethnic minorities in the performance as children, the PRC removes minorities' capacity for agency and authority. For Heberer (2001:136) the key to these stereotypes is their inherent "hierarchization, because it perpetuates and legitimizes inequality" within Chinese politics and culture. Children as symbols in Chinese art historically are essentially individuals with less value than adults. Images of them in Han Chinese artwork can be recognized by art historians primarily by their "reduced size," which indicates "their relatively unimportant status," and is not unique to children: there is little to distinguish figures of children from those of "servants or other adults of less importance," which are also denoted by size (Wicks 2002:3). Some texts even suggest that in ancient Han society "mortuary rites were not performed until a child was at least eight *sui* (Chinese years), and even then in an abbreviated version," suggesting a lesser importance of the souls and deaths of children as opposed to adults (Wicks 2002:3). Images of children have also been used in Han artwork to reinforce social values (Wicks 2002:2). In fact, "the use of child imagery was meant specifically to encourage obedience to tradition" (Wicks 2002:27). So the use of children in the Olympic flag raising ceremony not only implied a lower social status and an absence of autonomy for ethnic minorities, but would also seem to function to enhance the instructional aspect of the performance, impressing upon local ethnic minorities the importance of conformity.

Chinese depiction of Tibetans and other ethnic minorities also fits Edward Said's concept of Western Orientalism. Said argues (1979:36) that the founding tenets of Orientalist thought are that one's own nation dominates, and the other "must be dominated, which usually means having their land occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled, their blood and treasure put at the

disposal” of the other nation. Said originally referred to Western civilization but in this case China takes on the West’s role. This thought framework not only tends to imply inferiority, but also exoticizes the objectified nation—in this case Tibet—and in so doing paints a one-dimensional picture of its culture. In his book *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, Donald Lopez explores this kind of objectification, arguing (1998:157) that Tibet has a history of being highly otherized by its neighbors; specifically, by Chinese, Mongol, and Manchu dynasties as a “distant, somewhat unrefined yet magically potent neighbor.” Here, “cultural primitiveness is paired with exoticism” and bliss; mystical images of women and children only serve to highlight the “role of the Han as a patriarchal teacher and father figure,” (Heberer 2001:121). In ancient artwork, both Buddhism and Daoism also contributed to the role children in depictions of paradise (Wicks 2002:6). Meditating on the infant was meant to “restore one’s original purity,” (Wicks 2002:5). Over the course of Han Chinese art history, children were used to teach lessons, reinforce social etiquette and morals, symbolize the anti-masculine or anti-authority, and were associated with a primitive kind of purity. To add insult to injury, Western literature also regarded Tibet as a kind of utopia filled with magical creatures, an image that “has limited the acceptance of the Tibetan state as a realistic candidate for sovereignty by the international community” further strengthening the PRC’s hold on the region (Klieger 2006:215).

As a political actor and object, Tibet is perceived differently “from source to source,” and “audience to audience” (Klieger 2006:214). But its presence in Chinese propaganda like the Olympic flag-raising ceremony is complicated by the fact that the “fundamental ethnic contradiction” in the PRC today is not between Han Chinese and Tibetans, but rather between a kind of monolithic political party and a “multi-ethnic society,” in which Tibetans are “but one



ethnic group among many,” who are made to fit into the People’s Republic (Heberer 2001:111). This is why only one child visible in the ceremony is wearing obviously Tibetan dress; the others represent the numerous other cultural identities present in the margins of the PRC. Most Chinese depictions of ethnic minorities are just like the flag raising ceremony in that they show “colorfully dressed minorities dancing, singing, and laughing,” (Heberer 2001:121). The intended effect on Tibetans within the PRC is to “convince” them that “they are really Chinese,” and therefore have no reason to desire independence (Smith 2008:173). In practice, the Chinese government attempts to replace local language, dress, and other customs with the elements of Han Chinese culture (Heberer 2001:112).

The Beijing Olympics flag-raising ceremony is rife with politically charged cultural implications involving Tibetans as well as other Chinese minorities. By projecting an image of certain unity and harmony, the ceremony remains consistent with decades of propaganda. Although in practice the occupation has administered questionable practices, the Chinese invasion and occupation of Tibet has been painted as necessary, inevitable, and beneficial to all parties involved. The children dressed as China’s various ethnic minorities in the flag-raising ceremony walk in time as a smiling, unified group. They represent the variety of “pure” cultures contained within the greater People’s Republic of China; they also embody clear inferiority to the military-dressed adult men who take the flag from them—representing the Han Chinese state. A somewhat fatherly—and hierarchical—relationship is insinuated between these men and the children: they are their protectors and instructors. Ultimately, one goal of this ceremony was to demonstrate cultural unity and military might to international actors. Another goal, however subtle and impenetrable to

some outside viewers, was to further diminish the Tibetan drive for independence, and insist once more upon Tibet's place of belonging within the Republic.