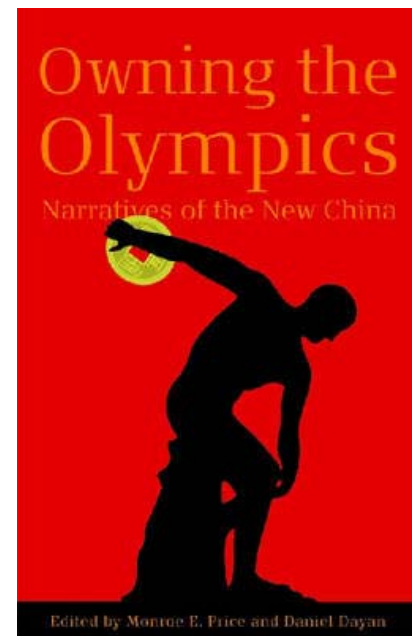


Monroe E. Price & Daniel Dayan (Eds.), **Owning the Olympics: Narratives of the New China**, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 424 pp., 2008, \$70.00 (hardcover), \$26.75 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Jeroen de Kloet
University of Amsterdam

Owning the Olympics: Narratives of New China is one of several books published just prior to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The scope and depth of the work presented here from scholars of various disciplines, such as China studies, political science, media studies, and law, make the book a highly relevant contribution to our thinking about both media events in the 21st century and the alleged rise of a new global power. As the subtitle of the book indicates, this volume tackles the different and often antagonistically-mediated narratives of a new and upcoming China. As such, the focus is on media and politics rather than sports and the body.

Prior to the Games, there were already ample signals to indicate that, although the Beijing authorities may perceive the Olympics as an ideal opportunity to celebrate the assumed "renaissance" of Chinese culture, many other protagonists (foreign politicians, scholars, religious groups, NGOs, activists, journalists, and others) will play a role to intervene in the official narration of the Olympiad. As Price writes in the preface, the Games are a polyphonic, multi-voiced and many-themed media event (p. 2). This review presents a brief overview of all chapters, along with the reviewer's subsequent critical reflections.



The first section of the book is titled "Defining Beijing 2008: Whose World, What Dream?" It opens with a chapter by Jacques deLisle who analyzes how the Olympics serves as a semiotic battleground. The regime celebrates a prosperous, orderly, normal and globalized China, where tight security and an intense clean-up of the city are measures used to achieve these ends. The narrative underpinning of this global promotion is that of Chinese nationalism, the ideological glue that has replaced communism since it lost its appeal. However, these narratives are contested by both Chinese and, more prominently, foreign activists. Alan Tomlinson broadens the analysis from the political to the economical, showing how Olympicism converges with global capitalism. This leads to his observation that the financial well-being of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) is "dependent upon the patronage of aggressive multinational companies more interested in monopolizing global markets than in so-called Olympic values" (p. 79). Price perceives the Olympics as a platform, a global theatre of representation, where civil society can hijack the Olympics narrative to achieve its own ends. Two case studies substantiate his claim: The first focuses on the international labor movement's call for good labor standards and the second on the

protests related to China's involvement with Darfur, out of which the rather awkward term *genocide Olympics* was born.

The second section of the book, "Precedents and Perspectives," opens with a chapter by Nicholas Cull that shows how the Olympics serves as an exercise in public diplomacy. Like the preceding chapters, the author is keen to point at the potential of the emergence of counternarratives, resulting in the problematic claim that due to Internet and global satellite news, "China will be known as it is, not as it wishes to be" (p. 137). The chapter by Heidi Østbø Haugen on the construction in Beijing during the bid period draws on close analysis of promotion materials. This rich, empirically grounded study follows the more general analyses that precede it. Haugen illuminates how strategic self-orientalization is linked to a mythical past and a narrative of dizzying technological, economic, and social progress, all of which help produce a stable nation-state called China that is on its way to become a modern, global power. Jeffrey Wasserstrom turns the gaze back to the West and unravels, in a lucid historical analysis, how images of China in the U.S. press can be traced back to two tropes: The first is the American China Dream, which sees

Chinese as people who want to embrace our ways and who live in a land poised on the brink of shedding vestiges of worrisome old ways. The Nightmare is predicated on a contrasting vision of the Chinese as people who are helping to keep in power or have become the unwilling victims of a vicious state that threatens all we hold dear. (p. 172)

Shifting his historical analysis back to the present, Wasserstrom rightly predicts that these images will continue to taint Western perceptions of China. Indeed, he remarks that PR officials of the organizing committee complain that no matter what they do or said, China's image would always be twisted in the Western media: If there are protests at the Olympics, it will be a sign of how bad it is in China. If there are no protests, it will be evidence of how repressive the Communist Party is.

Sandra Collins then draws on an analysis of the cancelled 1940 Tokyo Games, the 1964 Tokyo Games, the 1988 Seoul Games and the 1998 Nagano Winter Games to show how the East-West dichotomy impacts them all. Time and again, the cities capitalize on their assumed hybridity — "the co-existence of modern development with ancient cultural traditions" (p. 186). In doing so, these Games reify, according to Collins, essentialized notions of the West being modern and Asia being traditional. Further, they imply that all Asian nations will peacefully enter a world system dominated by the West. This text shows that the self-orientalizing and mythologizing strategies employed by Beijing are not uniquely Chinese but are often used by other Asian cities, raising important questions about the (im)possibility of defining or exploring alternative modernities. The chapter by Briar Smith shows how both the demand for an open media environment and the desire for media control produce a highly unstable new climate for China. For her, the Olympics presents an important rite of passage "in which new approaches to media freedom, government transparency, and environmental stewardship could lead the way to a new, more globally participatory Chinese era" (p. 222).

"Theaters of Representations," the third section of the book, starts with an analysis of the urban reconstruction of Beijing. In her chapter, Carolyn Marvin shows how the new architectures, all designed by renowned Western architects, stir up debate because their construction is perceived in China as a slight against Chinese architecture. At the same time, foreign commentators critique these Western architects for cooperating with the Chinese regime. On the other hand, The Olympic Green represents a cosmopolitan comfort zone, a public space where life is a "colorful, bustling affair, a green escape, a frictionless territory of upscale consumption and leisure" (p. 255). In the chapter by Christopher Kennet and Miquel de Moragas, the authors offer a comparative account of how the Chinese part of the closing ceremony in Athens was broadcast on five TV channels (in respectively the U.S., Canada, Spain, Mexico, and Europe). Their analysis shows that the commentators, for the most part, lack cross-cultural understanding and quickly retreat to the safe narrative of sports, refraining from further cultural contemplations. In particular, NBC commentators lack preparation and are unable to explain the cultural symbolism. Lee Humphreys and Christopher Finley focus on the framing of the Beijing Olympics as a high-tech Olympics. This framing aligns with China's desire to become a technological innovator — progressing from the label "made in China" to the idea of "created in China." New technologies also hold the potential to produce counternarratives, as mobile phone users now can become producers of media content as well. The chapter authored by Hai Ren engages with a crucial question: Given its importance and popularity, how is it possible that Wushu, a full-contact sport that derives from Chinese martial arts, fails to become an Olympic sport? He rightly critiques the IOC's bias for the dominant sports of the West. His chapter serves as a timely warning against further homogenization of the Olympics. In their chapter, contributors Andy Miah, Beatriz Garcia, and Tian Zhihui focus on the growing importance of the nonaccredited media centers and their part in promoting citizen journalism, a role that continues to gain importance due to new technologies like blogging and podcasting. As their analysis shows, the host city is keen to support and promote these media centers as part of its branding tactics. The danger is that the different roles journalists perform will come again under the scrutiny of the IOC. Sonja Foss and Barbara Walkosz then analyze elite American newspapers' coverage of Beijing's preparations for the 2008 Olympics. They identify four ideological spaces (of definition, equivocation, accumulation, and anticipation) that operate on a binary logic: China as unique vs. China as Western; China as violator of human rights vs. China as upholder of human rights; China as abundant resources vs. China as limited resources; and China as powerful economic partner vs. China as unreliable economic partner. The analysis convincingly shows how these spaces "make China an entity that is capable of being known" (p. 364), giving audiences a sense of safety, stability, and control.

Turning to the possible future role of the IOC, Christopher Finley argues that although traditional Olympic internationalism suffers from centering the West as the ultimate model and goal for all societies, a new emerging Olympics internationalism allows for a negotiation of the "norms, aspirations, and roles of already powerful global actors as they interact in an increasingly interdependent world" (p. 376). The deliberate vague definition of Olympicism contributes to its adaptability and malleability. He shows how the IOC is necessarily implicated in a geopolitical narrative in which states and sponsors are in uneasy conversation with global civil society. Together with the contributions of Tomlinson as well as those of Miah, Garcia, and Tian, Finley's argument inspires critical reflection upon the role of the IOC.

In the final chapter of the book, Daniel Dayan revisits his and Elihu Katz's classic book *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (1992). He notes how the world has changed into one ridden with conflict — the semantic of conflictualization. In terms of syntactics, Dayan observes a banalization: that an exclusive focus on one event has become scarce and that we are instead constantly bombarded with “almost” media events. Finally, the pragmatics of media are disenchanting and reception more individualized, as consumers also become producers and messages multiply. Dominant events have now come to serve “as the contested ground for a multiplicity of media voices” (p. 398).

Dayan's renewed theorizations are aptly accurate when looking at the Beijing Olympics with hindsight. What we witnessed in 2008 was a multiplicity of events that were mediated across different media platforms. Most prominently, beside the Olympics, there were the Tibet protests in March, the events surrounding the Olympics torch relay, the Sichuan earthquake, China's space mission, the milk scandal, and the global financial crisis. All these stories feed into each other and make it hard to single out the Olympics as *the* Media Event. Instead, many living in China throughout 2008 felt they were experiencing a rollercoaster of events. Furthermore, most critical journalistic voices seemed to become silent the moment the Games had started. Then the sports competition itself took precedence (and probably rightly so), along with the nationalistic sentiments surrounding it, to become the focus of the media, both Chinese and foreign.

Two challenges haunt quite a few contributions to this book. First, in their uncritical adaptation of a discourse of “human rights,” “freedom,” and other related concepts, some contributors display what can be termed *conceptual imperialism*. For example, in the chapter that appears to frame the book as a whole, deLisle wonders whether the Games will present a journey “toward a more liberal and open environment in China” that may “bring the end of a closed and repressive order.” Throughout this chapter, the implicit assumption is that China ought to become an “open,” “liberal,” and “free” society. In a similar vein, Smith employs ideas of “government transparency” and “media freedom.” In his chapter, Price neglects to interrogate his notion of “civil society.” Such ideologically loaded concepts (that hint at a validation of a neo-liberal structuring of society) are presented unquestioned. They serve as assumptions that are neither problematized nor reflected upon. These assumptions are often accompanied by a rather one-dimensional critique of China. For example, Marvin's chapter critiques the urban reconstruction of Beijing, frequently pointing to the “ongoing demolition of what remains of the old” and the assumed alarming levels of air pollution. She writes in a rather naïve and nostalgic vein of how “neighborhoods in which extended families lived for centuries in close-knit community networks have been lost” (p. 252).

The dominant question posed in this book is how the Olympics can and will change China, assuming salvation will come from the outside. Literary critic Rey Chow refers to the “Western” portrayal of China as the King Kong syndrome, “producing ‘China’ as a spectacular primitive monster whose despotism necessitates the salvation of its people by outsiders” (1998, p. 94). Indeed, what this monster needs is exposure, discipline, and punishment to be contained (if not freed) and nudged toward a “liberal” and “democratic” society. This predicament calls for a counter question, one posed by Susan Brownell in her book on the Beijing Olympics (2008), which is recommended reading alongside this volume: namely, how China may change the Olympics. Unfortunately, this question seems to be beyond the purview of most of this book's contributors. Nevertheless, the pieces do speak to one another, which enhance the

value of this volume. It would be interesting to analyze where and how the texts in this book are haunted by the clichéd images of China as described by Wasserstrom.

A second problem is that of cultural essentialism. For example, the only chapter authored by a Mainland Chinese academic (Hai Ren) voices a highly relevant critique on the Western-centric ways in which the IOC includes certain sports and refuses others. Unfortunately, the author far too sweepingly essentializes t'ai chi as a sport that "reflects Chinese social values, such as self-control and benevolence" (p. 314) and aligns Chinese sports seamlessly to the idea of a univocal, coherent tradition. Such interpretation too easily ignores all tensions within the contested domain of "Chinese culture" as well as the Han-centric and Beijing-centric related processes of inclusion and exclusion.

Despite the problems of conceptual imperialism and cultural essentialism, the pieces in the book indicate the scholarly tactics that may help to overcome them. First, empirical pieces based on direct sources, rather than on reports from foreign journalists, help to present a more detailed and comprehensive account of the multiple realities of "China" and the Olympics. Situated knowledges often work better than general, universalized theorizations. Close readings of visual materials, combined with interviews and local sources, help to avoid easy generalizations. In my view, the best example of this approach is found in the contribution by Haugen. Second, historical, comparative approaches prove valuable in both countering and sensitizing us to the uniqueness of the Chinese case. They reveal parallels and discontinuities that help to understand the complexities of China. (See, for example, the contributions by Collins; Kennet and de Moragas; Miah, Garcia and Tian; and Humphreys and Finlay.) Third, a reflexive and critical approach seems indispensable to avoid simply imposing ideologically loaded concepts ("human rights") on China. This approach seeks to unpack the dominant narratives in Western media reports, for example, or questions our own position, our own concepts. (See, for example, the contributions by Wasserstrom; Collins; and Foss and Walkosz.) In short, a more Foucauldian take in which we also ask why we say what we say, and what the possible power-related implications of our discourse are, remains pivotal if we want to avoid a Eurocentric or Anglocentric interpretation. Perhaps the inclusion of more pieces by "Chinese" authors would have helped to strike a better balance in this respect. That said, this book deserves a wide audience. Its focus reaches beyond the Beijing Olympics, inspiring us to rethink the relationships between media, politics, and mega events. The chapters are in dialogue with one another, as well as with the reader, making this a fruitful intellectual journey that opens up multiple avenues for future research.

References

Chow, R. (1998). King Kong in Hong Kong: Watching the handover from the USA. *Social Text*, 55, 93-108.

Brownell, S. (2008). *Beijing's Games: What the Olympics mean to China*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

Dayan, D., & Katz, E. (1992). *Media events: Live broadcasting of history*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.