Spatial Structuring of Cultural Display Around China’s Olympic Games: Definition, Equivocation, Accumulation, and Anticipation

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To construct and display itself to its own members and to an external audience, a culture or nation employs many types of texts—legible or readable events or objects—including museums, historic homes and districts, rituals and ceremonies, architecture, shrines, sports events, artistic performances, and media offerings. Such texts are purposefully used as symbolic resources by the community to engage the past to forge an image that is “profoundly constitutive of identity, community, and moral vision” (Phillips, 2004, p. 90).

Although audiences interact with the texts of their own or another culture “to be edified, educated, and entertained” (Karp, 1992, p. 1), cultural displays are also “sites for ideological assertion” (Katriel, 1993, p. 70). Using various processes of rhetorical selectivity, cultures choose to feature “those events, individuals, places, and ideas that will be sacralized by a culture or a polity” (Blair, Jeppeson & Pucci, Jr., 1991, p. 263). As cultures choose the raw materials for constructing their displays, determine how the parts will be related to one another, and select the themes or motifs to incorporate into the design, they structure social order. The displays constitute material embodiments of preferred attitudes, feelings, and values and incline “those who occupy them to experience social meaning from particular, selectively structured vantage points or perspectives” (Prelli, 2006, p. 14). Cultural displays, then, are “always a means to something else”; they “get transformed for strategic purposes” (Browne, 1999) as they function “to defend different aims and agendas” (Zelizer, 1995, p. 226).
Nowhere is the ideological function of cultural display more evident than at the Olympic Games. Host nations use the Games "to emphasize [their] claims to having a leading status, mission, and destiny in the world international order and world history" (Roche, 2000, p. 10). Because the Olympics provides the sponsoring country with the opportunity to highlight its achievements to the world (Beck & Bosshart, 2003), the Games act as a "potent cultural resource with real implications for international relations and the domestic interest of nation states" (Polmanbeem, 2003, p. 57).

The Olympics provides the perfect forum for cultural construction and presentation in that it is one of "modern society's mega-events" (Roche, 2000, p. 1). Because the Olympics is "the largest scheduled and regularly recurring event in the world" (Rothenbuler, 1989, p. 138), it is "the world's largest and most important stage" (Tuggle, Hoffman, & Rosengard, 2002, p. 361). Its potential scope and impact derive primarily from the mediated nature of the Olympics, particularly its coverage in television broadcasts. That the Olympics is one of the most watched television events is evidenced by the 2.1 billion viewers in 160 countries who spent 13.1 billion viewer hours watching the 2002 winter Olympics in Salt Lake City ("100 years," 2000). The Olympics qualify, according to Dayan and Katz's (1992) framework, as a media event in that the Games provide a "witness-to-history" role for the media, require a special type of production treatment, and are viewed by an international audience that feels obliged to watch in a ritualistic fashion (Roche, 2000). The 2008 Olympics will give new meaning to the phrase "the whole world is watching" in that four billion people are expected to watch the Games; to accommodate this demand, China plans to launch two satellites to transmit Olympic media coverage worldwide ("China expects," 2007).

The 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing provide an extraordinary opportunity for China to display its culture, ideology, and values to a global audience. To win the Olympic bid in 2001, China promised to improve human rights, increase environmental protections, and address Beijing's traffic problems (Pan, 2007). It has defined its exigence as to create "a New Beijing" and to host "a Green Olympics, a High-Tech Olympics, a People's Olympics" (Kolatch, 2006). The exigence facing China's display of its culture at the Olympics, however, is far greater in scope than these goals; China must transform its image from a backward, repressive nation to a progressive pseudo-democracy so that it can become a legitimate and valued member of the global community. The official theme of the Olympic Games, "One World One Dream," suggests China's desire to position itself as a member of this global community, where it can create a "bright future with the rest of the world" ("One world," 2007). China "considers the Olympics to be modern China's coming-out party to the rest of the world" (Yardley, 2005), and by "taking on the Olympics, China committed itself to demonstrating that it is a world-class power." Its primary objective now is "to impress the world, by whatever means necessary" (Lubow, 2006).

In this essay, we provide an ideological analysis of the cultural display that China has
constructed through its preparation for the 2008 Games. An ideological analysis focuses on patterns of beliefs that determine a group's interpretations of some aspect(s) of the world—beliefs that reflect a group's "fundamental social, economic, political or cultural interests" (van Dijk, p. 69). The primary goal of the ideological critic is to discover and make visible the dominant ideology or ideologies embedded in a text or an artifact. As a result of this articulation of the ideology embodied in the artifact, the critic is able to answer questions about the ideology such as: What does the artifact ask the audience to believe, understand, feel, or think about? What arguments are being made in the artifact and for what? What are the particular characteristics, roles, actions, or ways of seeing being commended in the artifact? What values or general conceptions of what is and is not good are suggested? What are the assumptions or premises of the artifact? (Foss, 2004, p. 245).

The text that serves as the data for our ideological analysis is the image China has constructed of itself through its various cultural displays as it prepares for the 2008 Olympics. To discover the ideology that characterizes these displays, we analyzed media coverage of the Olympics in China between January, 2003, and May, 2007, in the New York Times. We used this newspaper as the primary source for our analysis because the Times "is the most respected U.S. news medium" (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 32), and the issues deemed newsworthy by this newspaper often set the agenda for other Western media outlets, including television, radio, and other newspapers (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). The Wall Street Journal served as a supplementary source of data for our analysis because, like the New York Times, it is a highly respected and widely disseminated newspaper. Both, we believe, are media sources that China would want to target for its messages of cultural display leading up to the Olympics, and both are representative of the Western media's construction of China. We relied to a much lesser degree on the official Olympic Games Web site to provide basic information about the Games for our analysis.

We have two primary motivations for seeking to understand the ideology behind the cultural display of China's Olympic Games. By understanding the particular nature of the ideology that China is constructing of its culture through the Games, we hope to gain an understanding of the communicative processes by which a culture transforms itself from one image to a substantially different one. The transformation that China is undergoing in advance of its Games is dramatic in contrast to the kinds of improvements that countries hosting the Olympics typically undertake. The means by which this transformation is accomplished and legitimized will provide information about the kinds of strategies available for completing a dramatic cultural transformation—in this case, from a poor, Third World nation to a significant, legitimate, and powerful member of the global community.

We also are interested in the effects of the cultural transformation that China is undergoing on the Chinese people themselves. We believe we can rightly assume that the cultural representation that China is disseminating to the Western news media in preparation for the
Olympics is also being directed at the Chinese people themselves, who are living the transformation and must accept or at least enact it if the representation is to be perceived as an authentic one by the global community. In this time of rapid cultural change that certainly must shatter and fragment China’s “communities and traditions, tearing individuals from familiar social structures” (Dickinson, 1997, p. 1), we seek to discover how the transformation in cultural representation is affecting the Chinese people themselves and how they are “remaking the residue of past decades into material with contemporary resonance” (Zelizer, 1995, p. 217).

What we suggest in this essay is that China’s cultural displays in advance of the Olympic games construct four ideological spaces. Each of these spaces attends to the needs of one or more primary stakeholders in China, although they all ultimately are addressed to the global audience. Each space addresses a major exigence, “something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be” (Bitzer, 1968, p. 6), and, in the case of China, each exigence must be negotiated or balanced by the stakeholders or interested parties who occupy that space. The contested terrain of the spaces is such that the tensions they contain cannot be resolved easily (or ever), so occupants of the spaces must find ways to remain suspended in a liminal space between the two primary options suggested by the exigence of the tension—options that represent different visions of what stakeholders want the future of China to be. These spaces, then, involve “activities of sharing, discussion, negotiation, and, often, contestation” (Zelizer, 1995, p. 214).

The four spaces that emerged from our analysis are those of definition, equivocation, accumulation, and anticipation. We turn now to an explication of each space.

**Space of Definition**

A major space that is being created in the construction of China through its cultural displays in advance of the Olympics is that of definition, which asks those who occupy it to consider what kind of city Beijing should be and what kind of country China should be. Primary stakeholders who inhabit this space are Western tourists, and for them, the exigence that characterizes the space is the tension between the familiarity and comfort of the West and the uniqueness of Chinese culture. The exigence of this space requires a balancing between wanting China to be much like Westerners’ home spaces—comfortable and non-threatening—and wanting to experience and appreciate what makes China unique. A second group of stakeholders who occupy this space are Chinese citizens themselves who are interested in securing some of the amenities that come with Western cities but who also do not want to lose what is familiar and home to them. In the space of definition, China must manage its cultural resources to help both of these groups define “place consciousness, what scholars in environmental psychology, folklore, and cultural geography call ‘sense of place’” (Glassberg, 1996, p. 18). The space of definition suggests that China is a perfectly appropriate partner in global affairs because it has the look and feel of participants’ own
countries but also brings with it unique resources.

China as Western

One of the options in the tension that constitutes the space of definition is for China to become Western. China’s cultural displays in advance of the Olympics suggest support for this option in a number of ways. The one that is receiving the most attention from the media is the “demolition of many of the city’s old ‘hutong’ neighborhoods, the ancient, densely populated enclaves of narrow, winding streets and crumbling courtyard homes.” The result has been the dislocation of “untold thousands of people, to make room for the thousands of development projects swallowing the city” (Yardley, 2005).

The demolition is exemplified in the historic neighborhood of Qianmen, “once the domain of Qing Dynasty opera singers and classical scholars.” One of the last intact hutongs, Qianmen is “home to teachers, shop owners, migrant workers and other working-class people.” Because it has fallen into disrepair, however, “many residents believe that officials do not want the neighborhood to be an eyesore at the center of the city during the Olympics.” As one resident asserted, “‘This neighborhood is the face of Beijing to the world. They don’t want foreigners to see this scarred old face.’” As a result, Qianmen is now “an eerie picture of destruction. Ancient homes lie in rubble. Scavengers squat in alleyways and wait to ransack vacated buildings” (Yardley, 2006, July 12).

China’s cultural presentation as part of the West is also evident in its demolition of archaeological sites. The construction being done for the Olympics is “uncovering so many antiquities that it might be considered a golden era for archaeology—except that sites and antiquities are often simply demolished by bulldozers or looted. ‘There are two enemies of antiquity protection,’ said Xu Pingfang, president of the China Archaeological Society. ‘Construction is one. Thieves are the others. They know what they want, and they destroy the rest.’” Developers and local officials often sidestep rules concerning the treatment of archaeological sites “partly because surveys and excavations can be time-consuming and create costly construction delays” (Yardley, 2007, February 8). Because archaeological sites delay the construction of modern cities, then, they are often destroyed without excavation so that China may more quickly achieve its goal of Westernization.

China’s display of itself as Western can be seen as well in the “eye-popping physical transformation of China” through its “craze for theatrically expressive schemes by famous architects.” Acknowledging that Chinese “architects were not yet up to the challenge, the Chinese had imported the best the West could offer” to create Western-style buildings. Several factors facilitate China’s embrace of Western architecture: “Cheap labor, at least as much as an unfettered outlook, permits the flourishing in China of avant-garde architecture, with its penchant for original engineering, unorthodox materials and surprising forms.” Not all the results have
been successful: The “National Theater is generally seen as a grotesquely inappropriate building on a supremely sensitive site.” Lamented Peng Pei Gen, an architecture professor, “They couldn’t do this in their own country, so they are taking advantage of the Chinese psychology that European thinking is better” (Lubow, 2006).

China is also beginning to look Western because of the kinds of commercial establishments that are taking the place of historic neighborhoods—the “[n]ightclubs, bars and art galleries,” for example, that have begun to spring up. In the area of Houhai, “20 or 30 bars all opened up” in one summer; one of these nightclubs is “a lounge with a modern décor and a cool minimalist patio,” while another is a place where customers come “to dance to the different D.J.’s and drink cocktails like Chivas Regal with green tea” (Yang, 2005).

Other typically American institutions are being introduced into China to make it a more familiar place to Westerners. Super 8 Hotels “opened six franchise hotels in China, including three in Beijing” (Conlin, 2006), and Ticketmaster “won the exclusive contract to supply tickets” for the Olympic Games (Silver, 2006). Westerners also will recognize the regional airline on which they fly within China because of Mesa Air Group’s launch of a regional airline in China in conjunction with Shenzhen Airlines (“U.S. carrier,” 2006).

Not only visual displays but the practices of Chinese citizens are the subject of scrutiny and discipline in an effort to Westernize the country. The Chinese have initiated a campaign to curb public spitting, “a frequent practice in Beijing and even more common elsewhere in China. Health officials, worried about communicable disease, have long tried to curb public spitting, with limited success, given that many people do not consider it unacceptable behavior.” Hundreds of volunteers have joined the group known as the Green Woodpecker Project, named for the woodpecker’s practice of picking up worms and cleaning up the forest; the group wants “to clean up the city the same way.” Group members “carry tissues, which they offer to people as an alternative to spitting on the ground, and try to convince the offender, usually male, to change his ways” (Yardley, 2007, April 17).

Yet another way in which China is trying to imitate the West is to clean up its English translations. “English translations on signs are considered fashionable and good advertising, as well as a gracious gesture to foreigners baffled by Chinese characters,” but many of the translations are poorly done and thus are often more comical than helpful. A local theme park about China’s ethnic minorities, for example, was “initially promoted in English as ‘Racist Park.’” In another example, pullet, which is a hen less than a year old, is listed on some menus as “Sexually Inexperienced Chicken.” In April of 2007, “Beijing announced new standards and official translations that can be used on more than 2,000 different types of signs, as well as on menus” (Yardley, 2007, April 17). Teams of linguists will patrol Beijing’s public places to cleanse the city of its “often comical English translations” in preparation for the Olympics (Fong, 2007).
China as Unique

Although a key focus of China's cultural displays in advance of the Olympics has been to portray itself as a thoroughly modern city devoid of an Asian heritage, those displays also feature China's heritage and its uniqueness as a culture. The design of the Olympic emblem, medals, torches, mascots, and the Olympic park, for example, draw upon Chinese history, culture, and language and are intended to create an Olympic experience unique to China. The main part of the 2008 Beijing Olympic emblem, a red dancing figure, resembles the Chinese character Jīng (Beijing, capital) and is “meant to symbolize the energetic and open city of Beijing” (“Olympic emblem,” 2007). The design of the five Fuwa or mascots for the Games draws upon Chinese folk art and tradition and embodies “the natural characteristics of four of China's most popular animals—the Fish, the Panda, the Tibetan Antelope, the Swallow—and the Olympic Flame” (“Official mascots,” 2007). Likewise, the Olympic medals will be discs of jade inscribed with the Olympic rings and a dragon. The Olympic complex also reflects Chinese culture in that it is built to feng shui principles, a design of harmony (Wilhelm, 2007).

Although some archaeological sites are being demolished, others are not, suggesting a reverence for Chinese history. Archaeological projects “are under way all over China,” and excavation of archaeological sites is encouraged in many ways. A network of government antiquity bureaus, for example, “has been established throughout the provinces and major cities. Chinese law also requires that real estate developers receive approval from the local antiquity bureau before proceeding with work. The Olympic site, in fact, is “an example of how China's antiquities protection system should work” in that “organizers have been careful to work with preservationists.” At the sites for the main Olympic stadiums, archaeological remains were discovered “tracing back 2,000 years to the Han Dynasty. In all, archaeologists excavated 700 ancient burial sites and recovered 1,538 artifacts, including porcelain urns and jade jewelry, while collecting more than 6,000 ancient coins” (Yardley, 2007, February 8).

China is also presenting its uniqueness by constructing many new museums designed to showcase key aspects of Chinese culture. Around the country, 1,000 new museums are planned to feature the history of oil lamps, beer, salt and piped water, aerospace, typhoons, tree roots, and smoking. The 2,300 museums that currently exist in China do not compare with the number of museums in developed nations, "especially with China’s long history," says Zhang Wenbin, secretary general for the China Society of Museum Studies . . . ” (Fong, 2006, November 24).

There is yet another way in which China embraces its heritage in the space of definition, and that is in the Chinese references that abound in the most visible buildings being created for the Olympics. The architects allude to the Chinese culture in several key Olympics buildings. The headquarters of CCTV, the national television company, for example, was designed to suggest a "calligraphic swoop," while the "airport terminal bears an unmissable resemblance" to a dragon.
“a beast revered in traditional Chinese architecture and folklore”; it also uses the “imperial colors red and gold.” The bird’s nest analogy for the main stadium is also one that references Chinese culture: “In China, a bird’s nest is very expensive, something you eat on special occasions” (Lubow, 2006).

The tension that creates the space of definition is between China’s interest in transforming the country—and Beijing, in particular—into a modern, Western space that will be familiar to foreign visitors and provide amenities for its citizens and its interest in preserving and featuring its unique culture. When those who occupy this space—visitors and the Chinese themselves—maintain a balance between the two sides of the tension, China is presented as modern but historic, familiar but unique. It adjusts to modernity as other major cities have, incorporating modern amenities but not at the expense of its particular culture. Should its presentation of itself tilt in one direction or the other, however, its presentation of itself to the global community has the potential to become suspect, resulting in a loss of credibility for China as a legitimate member of that community.

Space of Equivocation

A second space that is being created by China’s ideological efforts is a space of equivocation, marked by deliberate ambiguity or evasiveness. This is the space that China’s political leaders occupy, and the focus in this space is on addressing human rights issues. The exigence here is the tension between meeting global human rights standards and continuing to control knowledge and thus maintain power. Those who inhabit it know their space is shrinking as they accede to global demands for better practices concerning human rights; human rights is also an area that China promised to improve if it won its bid for the Olympic Games. If the political leaders resist global demands and standards for human rights too vigorously, they risk losing their place in the global community; if they acquiesce too much to those demands and standards, they lose their power within China. The successful negotiation of this space is particularly important for China’s efforts to enter the global community because the issues this space contains are ones that many other countries are pressuring China to address in particular ways.

China as a Violator of Human Rights

One of the major human rights issues that creates the tension in the space of equivocation concerns China’s relationship with Sudan. The problem has been summarized in this way: “China has been criticized for giving strong financial and diplomatic backing to the government of Sudan, which the Bush administration and critics worldwide say has practiced genocide in its southern Darfur region while waging a war against secessionists there” (Kahn, 2007, May 19). At least “200,000 people—some say as many as 400,000—mostly non-Arab men, women and
children, have died and 2.5 million have been displaced, as government-backed Arab militias called the Janjaweed have attacked the local population" (Cooper, 2007). China's economic relationship with Sudan is detailed by actress and activist Mia Farrow and her son, Ronan Farrow (2007), in an op-ed article in the Wall Street Journal: "China is pouring billions of dollars into Sudan. Beijing purchases an overwhelming majority of Sudan's annual oil exports and state-owned China National Petroleum Corp.—an official partner of the upcoming Olympic Games—owns the largest shares in each of Sudan's two major oil consortia. The Sudanese government uses as much as 80% of proceeds from those sales to fund its brutal Janjaweed proxy militia . . . ."

China also "has used its veto power on the U.N. Security Council to repeatedly obstruct efforts by the U.S. and the U.K. to introduce peacekeepers to curtail the slaughter" (Farrow & Farrow, 2007), an action also opposed by Sudan's president, Omar Hassan al-Bashir. That Darfur and the Olympics could collide in this space of equivocation is evidenced by the people who have become involved as activists with the issue. In addition to the Farrow, Ira Newble, a professional basketball player with the Cleveland Cavaliers (Beck, 2007), 108 members of the House of Representatives (Kahn, 2007, May 19), and writer Steven Spielberg (Cooper, 2007) have warned that "China must use its influence with Sudan's government to improve the situation in Darfur or face a possible backlash against its hosting of the Olympic Games" (Kahn, 2007, May 19); such activists are threatening to label the Games the "Genocide Olympics" (Cooper, 2007). In response, said Yang Jiechi, China's foreign minister, "There is a handful of people who are trying to politicize the Olympic Games. This is against the spirit of the Games" (Kahn, 2007, May 19).

China's restrictions on media access are well known, and its continued restrictions contribute to a picture of China as a country that violates human rights. Chinese journalists "face heavy censorship" (Yardley, 2006, December 2), according to Reporters Without Borders. In its annual report on press freedoms, the group asserted "that conditions for the news media and for journalists had deteriorated in China. 'The press is being forced into self-censorship, the Internet is filtered, and the foreign media very closely watched'. . . . Faced with burgeoning social unrest and journalists who are becoming much less compliant, the authorities, directed by President Hu Jintao, have been bringing the media to heel in the name of a 'harmonious society.'" Reporters Without Borders cited the five-year prison sentence given to a Hong Kong reporter and the three-year sentence given to a researcher in the Beijing bureau of the New York Times as examples of efforts to intimidate journalists. It estimated that, in total, "31 journalists were serving jail terms in China and that the authorities had convicted 52 more people for posting political views on the Internet" (Kahn, 2007, February 3).

Another example of China's efforts "to prevent domestic critics from voicing negative views" concerns a Chinese couple, Hu Jia and Zeng Jinyan, "who have promoted a variety of delicate social and political causes." They were barred from leaving the country in May of 2007 and
placed under house arrest. The police prevented the couple “from departing from Beijing on a trip to Hong Kong and several European countries,” where the two “had planned to call attention to what they described as a neglect of AIDS patients and to defend other Chinese campaigners for human rights who had been prosecuted in recent months.” The police told the pair that they “were suspected of ‘endangering national security’ and would be required to stay in their home under police watch for an indefinite period” (Kahn, 2007, May 19).

A similar restriction of information is taking place in the exhibitions housed in China’s new museums. One professor “fought Shenzhen city authorities when they wanted to omit mention of a devastating 1995 chemical-plant explosion from the city’s history museum he was designing. They eventually took his advice, though they played down the significance of the explosion.” Likewise, in an exhibition in the new Beijing Capital Museum “designed to show parallels between Beijing and global history,” no mention is made “of an 1860 pillaging of the imperial Summer Palace by British and French troops . . . . Museum head Guo Xiaolin said the period isn’t mentioned because it is only a small part of China’s history . . . .” Some subjects cannot be discussed at all; “the 1989 Tiananmen Square killings are still taboo . . . .” (Fong, 2006, November 24).

China as an Upholder of Human Rights

At the same time that China’s cultural displays reveal it as a violator of human rights, they also show it to be conforming to human rights practices. China’s control of the media is one such arena as “Beijing promised in its bid for the Games that it would . . . open its doors wider, allowing a freer flow of information into and out of the country” (Kahn, 2007, January 13). At the end of 2006, China began to fulfill the promise, announcing the loosening of restrictions on foreign journalists. The rules, announced by the Foreign Ministry, will temporarily “supersede existing restrictions that require journalists to obtain government approval before traveling or conducting interviews. Under the new rules, a foreign journalist will only need to obtain the permission of the person being interviewed” (Yardley, 2006, December 2).

Further evidence of China’s willingness to share rather than to hoard or restrict information can be seen in an agreement of cooperation signed between the United States and China in June of 2006. The agreement stipulates that each “country will send delegations of athletes, coaches and administrators to the other to share information about training and research.” China has signed such agreements with other countries as well. “This agreement will benefit the athletes and coaches of each national Olympic committee, but it will also benefit the Olympic movement and sports,” said Peter Ueberroth, chair of the United States Olympic Committee (Zinser, 2006).

Yet another way in which China constructs itself as an advocate for human rights is in its transformation concerning Sudan. China’s stance toward Sudan changed in April of 2007, when a senior Chinese official, Zhai Jun, recommended that Sudan allow a United Nations peacekeeping
force to support the African Union's efforts in Sudan. "We suggest the Sudan side show flexibility and accept the United Nations peacekeepers," he urged." He "even went all the way to Darfur and toured three refugee camps..." (Cooper, 2007).

In the space of equivocation, which is occupied primarily by China’s political leaders, the tension that must be negotiated is between conforming to global requirements for practices concerning human rights and violating human rights in order to maintain power and control over China and its citizens. China's cultural displays traditionally have featured the latter, but its most recent displays are suggesting a nascent effort to construct a different image for China—one that features conformity with human rights practices. From the perspective of the global community, China must tilt toward conformity and adherence with human rights before it will be seen as a legitimate member of that community.

**Space of Accumulation**

A third space created by the tensions generated by China’s efforts to transform its image is a space of accumulation. This is the space in which most Chinese citizens reside, and it is a space in which they have greater access to the resources of the global community as a result of the Olympics—resources such as money and information. The Chinese consider the number 8 to be lucky because it rhymes with the Chinese character for wealth; as the Olympics means the possibility of wealth for the Chinese, it “is no coincidence that the Summer Olympics in Beijing will open on 8/8/08 at 8 p.m.” (Yardley, 2006, July 5).

The space of accumulation is an expanding space in that Chinese citizens have some freedom to challenge the rigid political and economic system and to begin to act in new ways. At the same time, they must constantly monitor their actions to insure that they do not transgress in ways that would deny them access to the resources they seek. They balance between accommodating the wishes of the Chinese leaders for a reformed China (standing by while their homes and neighborhoods disappear and refraining from spitting, for example) and earning the indirect rewards (greater economic freedom, for example) that come from gesturing in some small fashion toward the hierarchy. For these stakeholders, the tension is between accumulation of resources at the cost of other freedoms and lack of access to resources as a consequence of seeking other freedoms.

A second set of stakeholders who occupy the space of accumulation is manufacturers who create markets for consumer goods and make money themselves from marketing those goods to the Chinese. China is a vast and largely untapped market for infinite numbers of consumer goods, and this is the space in which new markets are created for consumer goods. But markets can be limited in many ways in China, and when they are, access to economic wealth through the marketing of products is denied or diminished. The exigence these occupants must negotiate is
between attaining access to and being denied access to markets for the products they want to sell.

**China as Abundant Resources**

The major way in which accumulation and access to resources is encouraged is in the massive marketing efforts that accompany the Olympics. "In my 20 years in the Olympics, I have never seen the level of interest that I am seeing here," said Michael Payne, marketing director at the IOC, on a recent trip to Beijing" (Chang, 2003). The Games already "have 55 official sponsors and suppliers, including Coke, Adidas AG, Visa International Inc. and Lenovo Group Ltd.—compared to 38 at the 2004 games in Athens." More "than $5 billion will be spent on ads in China featuring Olympic themes, estimates MindShare, WPP Group PLC’s media-buying agency" (Fowler, 2007).

Because of China’s immense market, the Beijing Games are drawing "a larger-than-usual field of corporate competitors . . ." (Fowler, 2006). The Olympics traditionally have one "official brand of credit card, one computer, one wristwatch." The 2008 Games, however, "already boast three official beers: Tsingtao, Yanjing and Budweiser. ‘One beer cannot cover all China,’ says Liu Jun, deputy director of marketing of the Beijing Organizing Committee, or Bocog.” China’s large number of beer drinkers and the fragmented market justify the "sudsy trifecta," with each of the beer companies establishing "a different target audience . . .” Said a Tsingtao representative, "Our point of view is this is the first time that China will conduct the Olympics. We believe it is a great thing that many Chinese brands and businesses are able to participate” (Fowler & Lee, 2006).

Another way in which accumulation is featured in China’s cultural display is in its encouraging of his citizens to participate in sports, thereby creating entirely new (and huge) markets for products. For example, organizers of the Games are trying to shift local perceptions of bicycling. To most Chinese citizens, "the bike is transportation—a tool for getting from here to there rather than a source of healthful exercise or fun. Now, that is beginning to change . . .” The Olympics organizers "are trying to raise interest in the sport by adding a bicycle-motocross (BMX) event to the 2008 Olympics,” at which riders will race on modified bikes on a dirt track. Tang Mingxi, the sales manager at a bicycle manufacturer in China, notes that, not long ago, "you would never see people on the street using their bicycles for exercise, but beginning last year, you see it everywhere. You’ll see—the market for BMX and other specialized bicycles is going to grow. When something is popular here, it catches on quickly” (Chao, 2007).

Another effort to encourage the Chinese people to participate in new sports and thus to create new markets for sports equipment is China Central Television’s launch of a reality show with the theme "sports can be for all—even the weedy and untrained.” The show aims to pluck someone from the nation’s . . . population to become an Olympic athlete”—a coxswain to steer the men’s and women’s teams of rowers in the Olympics—a position that requires “just a healthy set of
lungs and a good sense of direction.” The search to find a male and female winner “will draw from parts of “Survivor,” “The Apprentice,” and “American Idol” as organizers seek to make stars of China’s rowers, whose sport doesn’t have much of a following in that country.” There are other ways in which the show will allow access to resources: “Of course, the new TV reality show could also draw millions in ad sponsorship for broadcasters” (Fong, 2006, August 29).

**China as Limited Resources**

Although some aspects of China’s cultural displays tout China as a burgeoning market that will provide greater access to goods and resources for its citizens, its displays also limit access to available resources. One example is the Chinese government’s stunting of the growth of sports marketing through a “creaking socialist system of state control over athletic careers . . . .” As a result, it is a “headache for advertisers counting on Chinese sports heroes to help them grab market share in China’s fast-growing consumer market.” For advertisers, securing access to athletes is often difficult as officials want to focus on training them to win medals. This focus was dramatically emphasized when China’s top sports minister, Liu Peng, “sent ripples through the marketing industry by suggesting to a Beijing newspaper that in order to keep athletes focused on training for the 2008 games, he would ban them from ‘social activities.’ That has been widely interpreted in China to include advertising and public-relations work” (Fowler, 2007, May 15). That investing in marketing in China can be risky also can be seen in the example of diver Tian Liang, who won gold and bronze medals in Athens in 2004. He “was kicked off the Chinese national team after appearing in too many commercials” (Fowler & Lee, 2006).

Marketers face other problems in China: “Murky rules make it difficult for advertisers . . . to work with Chinese athletes. ‘Brands don’t know where to go or how to do it,’ says Phil de Picciotto, the president of the athletes and personalities practice at Octagon, a sports-marketing division of Interpublic Group of Companies Inc.” As a result, “brands have had to develop relationships with sports federations,” which handle athletes’ careers, “to gain access to their stars.” There are no clear rules “about when and how athletes have to go through their federations or whether they can use individual agents . . . .” In addition, “even scheduling time with some Chinese athletes can take months of planning.” Sponsors who “pay as much as $1.3 million” to be associated with famous athletes may not even be allowed access to them “for ad shoots or appearances at their events.” Just to get such athletes “once a year for a commercial shoot, they need to pony up nearly $2 million” (Fowler, 2007, May 15).

China’s poor record with intellectual property rights is another potential limitation to access to markets and consumer goods in China. Some brands are “nervous about ‘ambush marketing’ or fu ji shi ying xian, in which brands either steal the Olympics logo or find ways to work Olympic images into their ads” (Fowler & Lee, 2006). China is notorious “as a knockoff haven where poor law enforcement has turned a potentially huge consumer market into a land of 75-cent pirated DVDS and $10 fake Louis Vuitton handbags.” If Olympics merchandise is copied, the
market for Olympics goods will be dispersed and the funds expected to pay for the Games may not materialize. "We have no fixed assets," says Liu Yan, deputy director of legal affairs for the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad, which operates under the Beijing city government and various national government agencies. "So the Olympic logo is the most valuable thing we own" (Fowler, 2005). In response to the threat of Olympic knockoffs, Olympics officials have "already shut down some unauthorized use of its logo and is considering launching educational campaigns on state TV to inform the public about the phenomenon" (Fowler & Lee, 2006).

In the space of accumulation, Chinese citizens who seek access to resources balance the acquisition of such resources with deprivation of freedoms in other areas of their lives. Those stakeholders who are manufacturers and marketers seek to develop markets and sell goods to these nascent consumers, negotiating marketing efforts with the Chinese government’s efforts to rein in and control such efforts. Apparently unfettered access to resources is a hallmark of a capitalist country, which is not part of China’s explicit cultural display; its implicit display of resources as accessible and even often unlimited, however, presents a significantly different image to the global community.

Space of Anticipation

A fourth space created by China’s cultural displays is a future space—a space in which China will be a legitimate and fully participating member of the global community. Those who participate in this space are the Chinese and all members of the global community who will be affected by China’s greater participation in world affairs. This space is developed largely through economic themes and is rooted in the tension between growth and control or between China as a strong economic partner and China as an unreliable economic partner in the global community.

China as a Powerful Economic Partner

A major way in which the space of anticipation is created is through China’s rise as an economic power, which is forcing its way into the global community. "In the last 30 years, no major economy in the world has grown at the speed of China’s, and no other country has been able to do it year after year, for over a decade." In 2006, "China did it again, saying that its economy grew by a whopping 10.7 percent . . . the fastest pace in more than a decade . . ." (Barboza, 2007, January 26). The growth continued in 2007; the economy grew "11.1 percent in the first quarter" of 2007. China’s economic growth is such that it soon could "overtake Germany to become the world’s third-largest economy, behind those of the United States and Japan" (Barboza, 2007, April 20).
China's stock market is booming as well. In 2006, "the country's key index—the Shanghai exchange—rose 130 percent to close at 2,675, a record and the best performance of any major stock exchange in the world..."; it soared even higher in the opening weeks of 2007. "One Chinese mutual fund raised $5 billion in a single day... before closing its doors to new investors..." The run-up in the stock market means that "companies in China can once again raise money in the Chinese market rather than relying on the Hong Kong stock market" (Barboza, 2007, January 6).

Record trade figures also provide evidence for China as a powerful force in the world economy. "After posting a record $100 billion trade surplus in 2005, much of it with the United States and Europe," China announced in June of 2006 "that its total surplus had already reached nearly $47 billion in the first five months of this year, a period that is traditionally slower for exports than the second half of the year." During that time, its "exports rose 25 percent, to $73 billion, while imports rose 22 percent, to $60 billion" (Barboza, 2006).

**China as an Unreliable Economic Partner**

China's cultural displays also contain efforts to avoid a construction of China as an unreliable economic partner. China does not have much incentive to slow growth, however, because the Communist Party bases "its legitimacy on delivering economic growth," and local officials "are promoted, foremost, for delivering economic growth." High growth "is needed simply to keep unemployment in check, and top leaders fear that a slowdown could lead to social instability" (Yardley, 2005, October 30). The government, then, "is determined to keep the economy expanding but is concerned about growing so quickly that the economy might crash before 2008..." (Barboza, 2007, January 6). "Right now, the economy is growing at the upper limits of what is acceptable," said Li Lianfa, an economist at Peking University. "The government is facing a lot of challenges." Among the challenges "are balancing the supersize growth and heavy investment, and trying to distribute the riches as evenly as possible" (Barboza, 2007, January 26).

Beijing is also under pressure to allow the Chinese currency, the yuan, to appreciate more quickly against the dollar in the hope of easing the country's trade surplus with the United States. Chinese officials, however, assert "that the pace of currency revaluation must be measured and that they will not be pressed into moving hastily" (Barboza, 2007, April 20). The yuan strengthened somewhat against the dollar in 2006, "climbing to about 7.8 yuan to the dollar, from 8.26 yuan in 2005. Economists have warned that if the yuan does not continue to appreciate against the dollar and other major currencies, China could face protectionist action, which could pose an even more serious threat to economic growth" (Barboza, 2007, January 26).

China also faces concerns about its "enormous rise in bank loans" (Barboza, 2006, June 13), "too much money in the financial system could ignite inflation and perhaps fuel a stock market
bubble.” In January of 2007, China’s central bank “raised the reserve requirement ratio for banks, the fourth increase in six months, to further tighten the nation’s money supply,” a move that increased “the reserve ratio by half a percentage point to 9.5 percent.” “Raising the amount of cash reserves that Chinese banks keep on hand with the central bank effectively restricts the amount of money that banks can lend” and curbs “excessive lending to new factories, real estate projects, and road construction” (Barboza, 2007, January 6).

China’s potential unreliability as an economic partner is also predicated on the environmental devastation its economic growth has generated. For the Chinese government, the question is how to address the country’s environmental problems without crippling the economy: “China, it seems, has reached a tipping point familiar to many developed countries, including the United States, that have raced headlong after economic development only to look up suddenly and see the environmental carnage. The difference with China, as is so often the case, is that the potential problems are much bigger, have happened much faster and could pose greater concerns for the entire world.” Pollution levels in China “could more than quadruple within 15 years if the country does not curb its rapid growth in energy consumption and automobile use.” Other environmental problems abound: “China is already the world’s second-biggest producer of greenhouse gas emissions and is expected to surpass the United States as the biggest. Roughly a third of China is exposed to acid rain. A recent study by a Chinese research institute found that 400,000 people die prematurely every year in China from diseases linked to air pollution” (Yardley, 2005, October 30). “‘In the past, we never thought of the capacity of resources,’” said Huang Yan, the deputy director of the planning commission in Beijing. “‘We only focused on development’” (Yardley, 2005, August 28).

All of the ideological spaces constructed through China’s cultural displays are designed to legitimize China’s participation in the global economy. The space of anticipation explicitly is designed to function in this way as China seeks to establish its credentials as a steady, significant, reliable economic force, downplaying any signs that it cannot control its economy or the negative environmental impacts of the economy.

Functions of the Spaces

The four ideological spaces of definition, equivocation, accumulation, and anticipation that China is presenting in its construction of itself in the run-up to the 2008 Olympic Games are marked by a number of characteristics. One is that the spaces overlap and are not as clearly demarcated as we have described them in this essay. The space of accumulation, for example, clearly overlaps with and is affected by the space of equivocation. As Chinese citizens decide how far they can go in their quest for resources and Chinese leaders decide how much to loosen access to formerly restricted resources, they both are moving in and out of these two spaces.
What is also true is that individuals occupy more than one space at a time; individuals “have more identities than they are allowed in a single setting, and these identities often overlap and even contradict one another” (Karp, 1992, p. 20). Although we talk about stakeholders as occupying certain spaces, then, those stakeholders certainly are not confined to particular spaces and move freely among them, simultaneously adhering to multiple and even contradictory ideological assertions. We want to acknowledge, then, the fluidity and multiplicity of the four spaces for stakeholders.

The four ideological spaces serve a number of functions for the various parties who engage with and are affected by China’s cultural displays. For Chinese citizens themselves, the spaces create zones of safety, stability, and some degree of security in the midst of great change, helping various stakeholders know the issues and the boundaries with which they must deal. Instead of facing massive cultural changes anywhere and everywhere, the Chinese, by situating themselves primarily in one ideological space, must deal only with negotiating the tension that is the exigence for that particular space. The exigence they must meet—the domain in which they must operate—thus is simplified and made manageable.

At the same time, when they choose to occupy a space and to focus their attention there, Chinese citizens are able to influence the change that is occurring there. They are able to claim some degree of cultural authority or agency over the presentation of a preferred version of change in China because they can clearly define an issue, decide what position to adopt on it, and decide what action to take on it, thus affecting the outcome of the negotiation of that space. Those who occupy these spaces have some latitude for movement and thus influence even in the face of China’s political restrictions because the spaces cannot be controlled exclusively by the political leaders—such control would upset the balance that has been negotiated to address the particular tension within the space. Participation in any of the spaces, then, insures some degree of agency for the Chinese people.

The ideological spaces perform a different function for the nation of China and its objective of being accepted by the global community. The spaces keep open the nature of China’s participation in this community because they do not allow China’s image to become fixed and settled. If the global community considers rejecting China as a legitimate participant because of its political restrictions, for example, the spaces allow China to point to its opening up of restrictions and the greater freedoms it is offering—the balanced view that is negotiated, repaired, and balanced in the spaces of equivocation. The spaces thus suggest that there can be no one truth about China—a truth that might potentially harm its construction of itself to the world. Rather, the truth about China is always fluid and changing, depending on the space one chooses to occupy and the particular option within a tension to which one adheres.

For outside observers, the spaces take the vast and complex information available on China and simplify it into easily told and remembered narratives. They reduce China to four primary
arenas, each clearly defined, giving hope to foreigners that they might gain an understanding of China and be able to negotiate the culture should they choose to visit. Although ambiguity is a crucial function of the spaces, for citizens of the global community outside of China, the spaces limit that ambiguity and make China an entity that is capable of being known.

The ideological spaces function in particular ways for the media as well. The spaces enable the media to create news stories that meet the common values established for news, including impact, prominence, timeliness, proximity, and conflict (Mencher, 2002). The spaces are rooted in common perceptions about China—its ancient culture, political restrictions, poverty, and looming economic potential. But each space contains a theme that opposes a common perception with a contradictory theme, creating the tension that constitutes its exigence. In the juxtaposition, contradiction, and opposition of the tensions lie news stories waiting to be told, so the spaces facilitate the creation of and outlines for these stories.

As both rhetorical and ideological assertions, the four spaces of definition, equivocation, accumulation, and anticipation that China has constructed through cultural displays to present itself to the global community operate effectively to handle dramatic and sweeping change vis-à-vis its political leaders, its own citizens, foreign observers and visitors, and its relationships with other countries. The 2008 Olympic Games themselves, of course, will be the real test of whether China can continue to use the spaces to organize its cultural displays and to control its image in ways that accomplish its strategic objective of full and legitimate participation in the global community. If something happens at the Games or in China’s cultural displays to feature one space over another or to upset the balance in the contested terrain within the spaces, China’s self-construction could change dramatically and possibly in negative ways. Whether the spaces continue to be maintained following the Olympics also will suggest a great deal about how China sees itself, how it seeks to position itself within the global community, and whether it gains the legitimacy it desires within that community.

References


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