

Reimagining the Past at the Beijing Olympics

by

Galen Poor
BA, University of Wisconsin, 2007

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Supervisory Committee

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Supervisor

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Abstract

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This thesis examines the 2008 Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony, which was an unprecedented effort by the Chinese Party-state to reinvent Chinese national culture for consumption at home and abroad. Director Zhang Yimou delivered a spectacular event – three-thousand chanting Confucian scholars, two-thousand Ming Dynasty sailors, a grid of giant dancing printing blocks and an endless display of fireworks presented a sensational spectacle of Chinese culture and history. How should we interpret these symbols representing a romantic Chinese past? I argue that the “ancient” history on display in the Opening Ceremony is actually a product of China’s recent past: its interactions with the West, revolution, nationalism and communism, and the turn toward capitalism and authoritarianism. This thesis pulls the Opening Ceremony back into this historical context, closely examining three of its most prominent symbols: Zheng He and his voyages to the Indian Ocean, the Four Great Inventions, and Confucius. My results show that, 1) far from being a product of China’s history alone, these symbols are a co-production of China and the West, in which both identities were mutually constituted; 2) they are created in the context of political power, and take on different meanings in response to political shifts; 3) they suggest a state desire for power and status rather than simply a revival of cultural heritage. This research will contribute to an understanding of the modern political uses of Chinese history.

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Introduction

The Opening Ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games presented the television viewer with two images of China. One, the Bird's Nest Stadium, a massive, avant-garde steel structure jointly designed by Swiss and Chinese firms, spoke to China's new cosmopolitanism, economic strength and technological ability—a China of the future. The Opening Ceremony held within the National Stadium, however, represented a China of the past. Spectacularly depicting a reinvented imperial history, it spoke of a China that is ancient, unique, a product solely of its own historical forces. Explaining the goals of the Ceremony, Director Zhang Yimou said, “With the world's eyes focused on the nation, not only should the greatness and rich culture of China be highlighted, but also the warm hearts of the Chinese people.”¹ If the Bird's Nest Stadium was a testament to China's material advances—their incredible double digit economic growth of the last twenty years, growing industrial and technological capacities, and increased cooperation with Western business interests—then the Ceremony would represent the “hearts of the Chinese people” beating within, the exceptional national spirit that propels China's incredible modern achievements, and defines the nation's special, destined place in the global community.

Bypassing Mao, communism, and the Chinese Revolution altogether, the Opening Ceremony depicted China as returning to a previously interrupted trajectory that began in its ancient past. This teleology is played out on a massive scale, presenting a romanticized and highly selective representation of Chinese history. Two-thousand-and-

¹ “Chief Director Zhang Yimou reflects on the success of the Opening Ceremony,” The Official Website of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, last modified on August 9, 2008, <http://en.beijing2008.cn/live/interview/n214520546.shtml>.

eight People's Liberation Army soldiers pounded out a greeting on ancient funeral drums; three-thousand Confucian scholars made a procession onstage, chanting from *The Analects* while the character *he* (harmony) flashed on stage; Ming Dynasty sailors waving long oars paid homage to the 15th century eunuch Zheng He, leader of the legendary voyages to the Western Ocean; the Four Great Inventions of gunpowder, the compass, typesetting and papermaking were displayed; children representing China's fifty-six ethnic minorities paraded under China's flag. This Chinese nation was symbolically born not with Mao Zedong and the revolution, but in an ancient past depicted as harmonious, creative and prosperous. The underlying message: we were great before, and we will be great again.

What are we to make of this portrayal of the Chinese past, devoid of historicity but purporting to represent the "hearts of the Chinese people"? I argue that the Opening Ceremony represents a collection of some of the most important symbols that the Chinese leadership has crafted to represent China to its citizens and the world. This thesis pulls the Opening Ceremony back into a historical context, closely examining three of its most prominent symbols: Zheng He and his voyages to the Indian Ocean, the Four Great Inventions, and Confucius. Hidden beneath these spectacular images is a history of global interaction, in which identities of East and West were mutually constituted. I will discuss the origins and routes of China's newly constructed image, which has intersected with the West's own formulation of self, and been the site of political struggles to define the soul of the Chinese nation.

Many contemporary observers have interpreted the Opening Ceremony as targeting a foreign audience, through building China's "soft power" abroad and winning the world's approval and admiration.² Joseph Nye, the political scientist behind the idea of "soft power" defines it as the means by which a nation-state achieves its international objectives through "attraction rather than coercion."³ Chinese politicians talk often about building China's "soft power" and have developed many initiatives accordingly. But many scholars have said that the Chinese leadership fell short in that regard, undercutting their "soft power" achievements at the Olympics with domestic crackdowns in Tibet and Xinjiang, drawing the ire of human rights activists. Nye himself has been one of the hardest critics of China's efforts, writing that, "What China seems not to appreciate is that using culture and narrative to create soft power is not easy when they are inconsistent with domestic realities."⁴ Indeed, contrasted with the lived realities of China outside the Olympics – political authoritarianism, environmental pollution, and social inequalities - the vision of China as a "harmonious society" presented in the Opening Ceremony appears a distant vision at best.

Other scholars who have studied closely the production of the Olympics have pursued a different line of questioning, concerning themselves more with what the

² For Example: Ken MacQueen and Jonathon Gatehouse, "Breaking Out the Good China for the Olympics," *Maclean's* 121, no. 33 (2008): 42-45.; Wolfram Manzenreiter, "The Beijing Games in the Western Imagination of China: The Weak Power of Soft Power," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 34, no. 1 (2010): 29-48, doi: 10.1177/0193723509358968; Peter Hays Gries, Michael Crowson, and Todd Sandel, "The Olympics Effect on American Attitudes towards China: Beyond Personality, Ideology, and Media Exposure," *Journal of Contemporary China* Vol. 19, Iss. 64 (2010).

³ Joseph Nye, "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy* 80 (1990): 153-171.

⁴ Joseph Nye, "Why China Is Weak on Soft Power," *NYTimes.com*, January 17, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/18/opinion/why-china-is-weak-on-soft-power.html?_r=2.

Olympics meant to China than to foreigners.⁵ Susan Brownell, who spent a year in China studying the preparations for the Olympic Games, reported that the Beijing Olympic Organizing Committee put vast effort into promoting the Olympics to a domestic audience, and surprisingly little into anticipating a global response:

As a result of the orientation of the intellectuals who designed it, the guiding thought of the People's Olympics was largely diverted away from any focus on China's international image and into a debate over *culture and education*. In my interactions with BOCOG [Beijing Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games] and the intellectuals who were working with it, I felt that about 80-90% of the effort that went into this symbol-making was directed toward the domestic audience. The main focus was on the questions of how to manage the "combination of Eastern and Western cultures" (*Dongxi jiehe*) that the Games were supposed to facilitate, how to promote Chinese culture within China and to the world, how to use the enthusiasm for the games to raise the general quality (*su zhi*) and civility (*wen ming*) of the Chinese people, how to prepare the next generation of young Chinese to take their place in the international community. These discussions and debates formed the intellectual context for Zhang Yimou's opening and closing ceremonies...⁶

Rather than winning hearts and minds abroad, the Olympic Ceremony was meant to shape domestic subjectivities through cultural production—one of the most powerful tools of governmentality available to the Chinese state. From this perspective, the symbols on display in the Ceremony should be seen as setting national norms and values, establishing a horizontal relationship between East and West, and instructing Chinese citizens on the ways to behave and represent themselves properly in the international arena. My thesis investigates the symbolism of the Ceremony from this perspective, by

⁵ For Example: Susan Brownell, *Beijing's Games: What the Olympics Mean to China* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008); Geremie R. Barmé, "China's Flat Earth: History and 8 August 2008." *The China Quarterly* (London) 197 (2009): 64-86, doi: 10.1017/S0305741009000046.; Kate Merkel-Hess, Kenneth Pomerantz, and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, eds, *China in 2008: A Year of Great Significance* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010).

⁶ "FAQ#8: Was there a Master Plan to use the Olympic Games to Promote a Positive Image of China to the World?," Susan Brownell, The China Beat, last modified February 9, 2009, <http://www.thechinabeat.org/?p=347>.

focusing on 1) the global debates and narratives behind them; 2) the shifting political agendas that these symbols have served; and, 3) the ways in which these symbols establish status relationships with the West.

Putting the spectacular symbols of the Opening Ceremony back into their historical and transnational contexts, three themes begin to emerge. First, these symbols are far from being a product of China's history alone, but are globally produced. The Ceremony and the Games generally emphasized that the Olympics would be an opportunity to share the rich Chinese culture with the world. Marketing of the Games repeatedly emphasized China's five-thousand years of history, portraying China as an ancient civilization stepping into the world for the first time. Media outlets around the world referred to the Games as a "coming out party," promoting a narrative of a long period of Chinese isolation finally overcome. This hides the fact that China's self-representation was built on symbols that were co-produced by historical actors in East and West, born in the intersections between China and the world as one sought to define itself against the other. China, or rather, an Oriental "other", loomed large in the European discovery of the self and "the West" during the 18th and 19th centuries. In the same manner, during the 19th and 20th centuries China reinvented itself against the image of a more technologically advanced, enlightened, and powerful Occident which was both a threat to the nation's existence and a model for imitation. Many of the symbols in the Ceremony are a product of this historical process of identity formation, in which symbols of China were conceived and popularized in the West before being reintroduced to China. The Ceremony domesticates this transnational process, giving globally produced images the aura of authenticity.

Secondly, these symbols are created in the context of political power. Tracing these symbols historically, they take on different meanings as relations of power change between China and the West. It is not the history associated with these symbols per se that has changed, but both China and the West have changed to give them new meaning. Many symbols of China's ancient achievements were created by Europeans as part of a narrative in which China enjoyed early success and inevitable decline, while the enlightened, superior Europe took up the reins of scientific power and global aspirations. Redeployed in the context of China's rise vis-à-vis the West in 2008, such symbols engendered a narrative of Chinese revival. Rather than inventing new historic images of themselves, the Ceremony refashioned the old images in this new context.

Third, these symbols suggest a state desire for power and status rather than simply a revival of cultural heritage. It is significant that rapid modernization and economic liberalization in China have coincided with the state endorsement of its imperial history. The more irrelevant the values, philosophy and politics of pre-modern times have become to contemporary China, the more they have been asserted as central to the national identity.

On the one hand, such images are now safe for the post-reform regime in a way they were not for Maoists. The Chinese Communists emerged out of the wreckage of China's imperial history, a past they promised to bury by means of ongoing revolution. This narrative was epitomized in the 1964 musical extravaganza *The East is Red*, which like the Olympic Opening Ceremony put history on stage to shape understanding of the present. This idealized depiction of the Chinese Revolution contrasts the "dark" past with the happiness of life after the "dawn" of communism. Opening with a colorful song-and-

dance in praise of Mao Zedong, the musical launches into a highly stylized and dramatic depiction of the revolution and eventual founding of the PRC. On stage are scenes of peasants beaten by landlords, the Long March, and elaborate battles against warlords, the Kuomintang and Japan. The impassioned performers leap, fight and die in an epic struggle against a “feudal” past, climaxing with a depiction of Communist victory in 1949, when Mao proclaimed “the Chinese people have finally stood up!” This story of liberation “presented a creation myth, a historical vision, a belief system, and a moral landscape,”⁷ which made the rise of the modern nation synonymous with the rise of the Chinese Communist Party. Mao Zedong, his face appearing high onstage as a sun in the sky, symbolically ushers in a utopian, classless society under his protective gaze. The revolutionary generation’s violent struggle of the 1920-1940s is depicted as a golden age which Chinese of the 1960s-1970s should restore and continue, while the imperial past is depicted as the “bad old days”, representing forces that must be continually routed out and destroyed.

“New China” (post 1978), however, emerged from the wreckage of the Cultural Revolution, and abandoned Mao’s revolutionary values. “New China” instead committed itself first and foremost to economic development, to build a “*xiaokang*”, or affluent society, and to build China’s strength in the global arena, to gain international standing and respect. The imperial past has been evaluated from this radically different perspective. While earlier Chinese Communists were much concerned with interpreting Chinese imperial history according to Marxist theory, celebrating folk traditions and peasant revolutionaries, in the Ceremony this same past is flattened into an ahistorical

⁷ Hinton, Carma; Barne, Geremie R.; Gordon, Richard. (2005). *Morning Sun*. United States: Long Bow Group.

“rich Chinese culture” and “five-thousand years of history”, a pastiche of images reduced to a series of spectacles. Unlike the Maoist version, this presentation does not identify an ideological lineage connecting past to present, but draws on the past to create power and status, global influence and domestic prosperity, reversing the Western colonial narrative of Asian decline and reclaiming China’s ancient place as the world’s preeminent superpower: these are the dreams and desires the Chinese leadership hopes to instill in its citizenry.

Chapter Summaries

1. Zheng He: Symbol of China’s Peaceful Rise

In the first chapter, I will examine Zheng He, the Ming Dynasty eunuch who led massive treasure ships to the Indian Ocean in the 15th century. This figure was first popularized not by Chinese, but by Western authors like British historian of science Joseph Needham, and more recently British author Gavin Menzies, both of whom saw Zheng He as symbolizing China’s past moral and technological superiority to the West in its interactions with foreign countries. Despite the objections of historians who see the voyages as they have been depicted in traditional Confucian historiography—as military enforcement of Chinese suzerainty—the Chinese government has appropriated and embellished such conclusions, promoting the voyages as guarantee that China will behave peacefully even when it is a big power.

2. The Four Great Inventions: Becoming a Scientific Superpower Once Again

What makes the four great inventions of Ancient China—gunpowder, printing, paper, and the compass—truly great? Rather than their value to China, they are a testament to China’s historic influence on Europe. It was Renaissance Europeans who first identified the great inventions as having changed world history irrevocably. Colonial Europeans, though, used the inventions to dismiss Chinese achievements, promoting a narrative in which China had enjoyed early success but was unable to develop modern science as the superior Europeans had done. It was not until 1930 that the great inventions were introduced in China as “*si da faming*”. They have been made to represent both an object of national pride, and an era of scientific superiority that China hopes to regain today.

3. Confucius: Redefining Asian Values

Perhaps the most complex of the three symbols studied here, Confucius has played the central role in state efforts to redefine the nation. The defining policy of President Hu Jintao’s administration is the “harmonious society” policy, an idea derived from Confucianism that appeared prominently in the Ceremony. Addressing China’s modern-day problems such as environmental pollution, social inequality, and political corruption, the Hu administration has proclaimed that “harmony”, rather than democracy or political reform, is the authentically Chinese solution. The new representation of Confucius as the source of Chinese values is a complete reversal of past Communist depictions, which identified Confucianism with everything that was wrong with the old society that had to be rejected. While Confucianism was renounced in Mao’s China, in

the Chinese periphery—Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore—scholars reconfigured it as “Asian values” that could mitigate the perceived social ills caused by capitalism. As Deng sought to emulate the economic success of these smaller neighbors with his 1978 reforms, Confucianism in this new guise was introduced to the PRC, at once encouraging an individual work ethic and deference towards authority, as well as making democracy appear foreign and inadequate – vital messages for the post-Reform regime.

The Bird’s Nest Stadium and the Opening Ceremony presented China as a hybrid of tradition and modernity, an advanced, prosperous nation with an ancient “Chinese heart”. This dichotomy echoes other messages emanating from Beijing, that China practices “socialism with Chinese characteristics”, or rather, capitalism with “Asian values”. This government insists that China is not like other countries, and it will, it must, join the world on its own terms based on its own special history and traditions. This argument about China’s culture and history is used to support a myriad of political claims: Democracy is not suitable for China, China will only act in good faith towards their neighbors, and that China is destined to become a scientific superpower. However, when positioning the “history” and “traditions” of the Opening Ceremony back in a historical context, they begin to look just as modern as the Bird’s Nest Stadium. Like the stadium, the symbols used in the Ceremony are transnational, produced by scholars and propagandists in Europe, China, and around the world. Like the stadium, their significance as symbols of the nation is mediated through political processes, and they become a site in which multiple actors compete to make their own claims about China. And like the stadium, they do not represent new state values and culture so much as the desire of the Chinese state for power and status.

Chapter 1

Zheng He: Symbol of China's Peaceful Rise

The essence of Zheng's voyages does not lie in how strong the Chinese navy once was, but in that China adhered to a peaceful diplomacy when it was a big power... Instead of occupying a single piece of land, building a fort or seizing treasure, Zheng He treated other countries with friendship. We think the legacy of Zheng He's seven voyages to the west is that a 'peaceful rise' is the inevitable outcome of China's history.⁸

-Xu Zuyuan, Vice-minister of Communication, 2004

“The Silk Road” segment celebrates China’s history of international trade and maritime exploration by depicting the Silk Road trade during the Tang dynasty (618AD - 907AD), and more importantly, the voyages of Zheng He during the Ming (1368AD – 1644AD). Utilizing thousands of performers and a cinematic score, it gives the deep impression of a powerful China, confidently venturing outwards. Notably, the segment is preceded by a brief image of the Great Wall—one of the most iconic, long-standing symbols of China known to the West. But it is quickly swept away by far more attractive displays—the graceful dance of a Dunhuang dancer, representing Tang Dynasty overland trade, and finally the stunning “Maritime Silk Road.” As blue light floods the stadium and ominous horns sound, thousands of marching Ming sailors make the outline of a ship. With impeccable precision, they wave long oars painted with images of the treasure ships, which carried Zheng He and his 27,000 soldiers into the Indian Ocean in the 15th century. On the digital scroll center-stage, two images come to the fore—a porcelain vase and the character *cha* (tea), representing the most prized and desired exports of imperial China. Finally, a male dancer appears with an ancient compass, a Chinese invention.

⁸ “Ancient mariner commemorated to demonstrate peaceful rise,” *Xinhuanet*, last modified July 7, 2004, http://news3.xinhuanet.com/english/2004-07/07/content_1581497.htm.

Round this figure, the sailors cheer and beat their oars up and down, leaving a deep impression of Chinese power.

The re-enactment of Zheng He's story at the opening ceremony brought Xu Zuyuan's preceding quote sensationally to life for two billion viewers. Over the last twenty years, the Chinese government has invested massive resources into reshaping the image of Zheng He's voyages into a symbol of national strength and technological achievement, and most importantly, stressing their purported peaceful nature. As Beijing has sought a more proactive role in world affairs, and a larger economic involvement abroad, it touted Zheng He as guarantee of China's good intentions and destined return to glory. This chapter will ask how the Ming voyages, largely neglected for centuries, became the ultimate symbol of China in the World at the 2008 Olympics. What kind of nationalism does it communicate? How does it change the way we view China's rise today?

Media Commentary: NBC vs. CCTV

Watching the perfectly coordinated performance of Zheng He's voyages at different locations, the commentators at NBC (in the USA) and CCTV (in China) both interpret the segment as symbolic of China's new openness as an ancient civilization. Their commentary not only enumerates the images on display but also represent a shared set of binary discourses about China's historical relations with the world: open/closed and peaceful/threatening. While the Ceremony itself spends little time on the Great Wall or Forbidden City—the most well-known icons of China in the West - NBC used these images repeatedly in preliminary presentations to emphasize that China is a “historically

insular civilization,” and the Beijing Olympics is a turning point in its history, China’s “coming out party.” NBC’s China specialist Jonathan Cooper Ramo even said that “The Silk Road” represents the greatest moment in Chinese history “because it was a time when China was incredibly open,” the result of which, “was an unbelievable cultural and economic blossoming.” The Beijing Olympics thus represented a “return to glory, a moment of redemption” in which China can reclaim the economic and cultural status they enjoyed in Zheng He’s time. The CCTV commentators likewise portrayed “The Silk Road” as symbolizing China’s open engagement with the world, adding that the history of Zheng He proves the “friendly and enthusiastic” nature of the Chinese people “since ancient times.” One of the most memorable performances at the Beijing Olympic Ceremony, the Zheng He segment was a shared narrative of the “rise of China,” although Western media were more cautious, suspicious even, in celebrating this rise than their Chinese counterparts.

Historiography

The variations between these commentaries point to the competing narratives about contemporary China in which Zheng He plays a critical part. Over the last century, the Ming voyages have been at the center of efforts to re-evaluate Chinese history, in Europe, China, and around the world. The historiography of this subject reveals how, since the 15th century, Zheng He’s legacy has been used to fulfill many political agendas, to create new narratives about China’s past and future, and to define core values of China and the West. We will see how Zheng He’s image in the Ceremony is a co-production heavily influenced by Western scholarship, which has only recently been fully

incorporated into Chinese depictions of the voyages. Finally, I will show how the Chinese government has used this history to promote their “peaceful rise” propaganda around the world.

Even during his own lifetime, the voyages of Zheng He were a controversial subject around which the Chinese imperial state would define the central values of the empire and its role in world affairs. From 1405-1433, the Muslim eunuch Zheng He led seven voyages to Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean to force regional polities to “acknowledge the power and majesty of Ming China and its emperor.”⁹ The Emperor Yongle (ruled 1402-1424) launched the voyages soon after usurping the throne, in an effort to expand the reach of the Chinese tributary system and legitimize his own rule. The fleet was built to compel submission to Chinese authority. Zheng He sailed in massive treasure ships up to 400 feet long, the largest ever constructed, with a crew of up to 27,000 men, mostly professional soldiers. They collected exotic gifts and brought foreign diplomats back to Beijing to kowtow before the Emperor Yongle, and fought three major battles with rulers who would not pay tribute. Leading historians today agree that the Zheng He’s voyages were not “journeys of friendship,” nor of discovery à la Christopher Columbus, but a form of proto-maritime colonialism, not altogether different from the militaristic Emperor Yongle’s many other military ventures against the Mongols, Yunnan and Vietnam.¹⁰

The expeditions fell afoul of Confucian officials, who saw the voyages as an immense waste of lives and resources with little benefit to the people. The Confucian

⁹ E.L. Dreyer, *Zheng He: China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty, 1405-1433* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007).

¹⁰ Geoffrey Wade, “The Zheng He Voyages: A Reassessment,” *ARI Working Paper*, No. 31, October 2004. www.nus.ari.edu.sg/pub/wps.htm.

view of good governance valued the maintenance of a self-sufficient agricultural society with a small government, rather than military conquests, which seemed only to produce exotic foreign gifts for the Emperor, while costing immense amounts of silver.

After the death of the Emperor Yongle, his successor Xuande, facing the rising costs of ongoing campaigns against the Mongols and a failing war in Vietnam, discontinued the voyages in 1433. The eunuchs and military officials thereafter declined in influence as the power of Confucians grew. Motivated by financial concerns, cultural values and political self-interests, they destroyed much of the historical evidence of the voyages, condemning them as a waste of “myriads of money and grain...and lives with no benefit to the state. They should never be repeated.”¹¹ For centuries to come, Zheng He would be depicted as an evil eunuch vassal of a militaristic emperor, and his voyages would be remembered, in the words one historian of Qing China, “as having little importance except as examples of imperial waste and extravagance.”¹²

“Opening” China: The Discourse of Colonialism

As China withdrew from the Indian Ocean, Europeans were just expanding their control. Sixty years after the end of Zheng He’s last voyage, the age of colonialism would begin when Christopher Columbus sailed to America (1492) and Vasco de Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope (1498). While Africa and the Americas were exploited as peripheries supplying raw materials and labor, Europeans dreamed of expanding trade with China, which had evaded them for centuries. By the early 19th century, they forced

¹¹ Dreyer, *Zheng He: China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty, 1405-1433*, 173.

¹² *Ibid.*, 165.

China “open” to European trade by defeating the Qing Chinese forces in the Opium Wars (1839–1842, 1856–1860). The Treaty of Nanjing (1842) inaugurated a disastrous century for Chinese sovereignty and cultural self confidence, which witnessed imperialist domination by the British, Russians, French, Germans, Americans, and Japanese.

Accompanying colonial expansion and Industrial Revolution beginning in late 18th century Europe was an increasingly negative, Orientalist view of China. Edward Said described Orientalism as knowledge of the Other created by a mass of writers in multiple institutions, a discourse that is a Western style of domination. Like the Middle East in Said’s book, China was made to embody the qualities seen as antithetical to modern Europe—it was traditional, static, unhistorical, and unprogressive. The German philosopher J.G. Herder’s 1787 depiction of China is a classic example of this view: “The [Chinese] empire is an embalmed mummy painted with hieroglyphics and wrapped in silk; its internal life is like that of animals in hibernation”¹³ European intellectuals such as Adam Smith, Karl Marx and Victor Hugo reproduced such images of China throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Hegel, a crucial influence in how the West thought about its own history, said that China

Early do we see China advancing to the condition in which it is found at this day; for [...] every change is excluded, and the fixedness of a character which recurs perpetually takes the place of what we should call the truly historical. China and India lie, as it were, still outside the World’s History, as the mere presupposition of elements whose combination must be waited for to constitute vital progress.¹⁴

Commercial exploitation was justified by this view of China as backward, static, and lacking the progressive, “historical” shift toward modernity that had been occurring in

¹³ J.G. Herder, *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity* (1787), XIV, 13.

¹⁴ G. W. Hegel, *Philosophy of History* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004), 29.

Europe.¹⁵ It was believed that through missionary and commercial contact with Europeans, the Chinese could hope to improve and modernize. Chinese intellectuals and revolutionaries of the May Fourth Movement (1919) reached similar conclusions albeit for different ends, advocating the overthrow of traditional culture and imperial rule in order to save the nation from foreign imperialism. Theirs is a voice unheard in the Olympic Ceremony, in which this past is seen as the wellspring of China's contemporary rise.

In their presentation of the Olympic Ceremony, NBC reproduces the colonial discourse of China as a closed society finally opening itself to the world. Despite decades of Chinese reform and industrialization, NBC's introductory segment depicts the event as the West's first glimpse into a mystical and ancient civilization. Immense palace doors open before the camera, as the narrator intones, "Their history goes back five-thousand years. But for the world's greatest wall builders, makers of a forbidden city, what happens tonight is not a small step, but a great leap. China is welcoming the world." As an image of a young Chinese girl relaxing at Beijing's Summer Palace graces the screen, the narrator asks, "Who will they be when this is over?" Images of the Forbidden City, the Great Wall and Summer Palace, symbolizing an insular and dictatorial empire, are replaced by more dynamic shots of modern Beijing and Olympic constructions—a modernity familiar to the West.

NBC asks us, is Beijing "ready to become a city of tomorrow," to finally overcome "the deprivations, and the self-imposed exile, of not so long ago"? Images of Chinese on bicycles and shabbily dressed old men smoking cigarettes stand in as symbols

¹⁵ J.D. Spence, *The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds* (New York: Norton, 1998).

of a “depraved” Communist past, contrasted with the gleaming, iconic Olympic stadiums of the more prosperous, capitalist present. NBC reproduces an Orientalist image of China preeminent in the Western imagination since the late 18th century, as an isolated civilization stuck in time, waiting for a foreign influence to wake it up. The question forgets a long and complex history of interactions between China and the West, not to mention the thirty years of “reform and opening up” since 1978. But the long and fraught relationship between the West and China—marked by colonialism, imperialism, and Cold War conflict – is forgotten. History is flattened into a before-and-after the Olympics narrative, centered on China symbolically “opening up” in 2008.

We need only look to NBC parent company General Electric to understand the true meaning of “openness”—commercial access for American corporations in contemporary times. GE invested heavily in Olympic construction and infrastructure, including the Bird’s Nest Stadium in which the Ceremony was held, from which they generated a total of \$1.7 billion in revenue. This was only the beginning of a long-term collaboration with the Chinese Communist Party to cater to the Chinese market, from which GE hoped to increase revenues to \$10 billion/year by 2010.¹⁶ NBC China specialist Joshua Cooper Ramo, who celebrates the Ceremony as “China’s coming-out party,” is also in the business of “opening” China, as managing director of Kissinger Associates, where he consults major corporations doing business there.¹⁷ While the NBC presentation alludes to openness as political reform and democratization, in reality, this discourse has always been primarily about opening Chinese markets to Western capital

¹⁶ William Patalon III, “New Look General Electric Aims to Double its China Business by the Decade’s End,” *Money Morning*, September 9, 2008. <http://moneymorning.com/2008/09/09/ge-3/>.

¹⁷ M. Allison, “Starbucks adds Joshua Cooper Ramo to board of directors,” *Seattle Times*, May 5, 2011. http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/business/technology/2014973823_starbucks06.html

and influence. This revival of an open/closed discourse signaled that “China’s rise” would be interpreted in economic terms, with American corporate interests first and foremost. This view is an antiquated interpretation of the Olympic moment, still absorbed with Cold War notions of China coming out from behind the “bamboo curtain” and overcoming the “deprivations” (the underlying meaning being “communist”) ways of the past. Yet in 2008, China and the West were incredibly economically enmeshed, a fact which would catch headlines the next year, as Americans worried over the trillion dollars of debt held by Beijing. NBC interprets the Olympics as a nation in transition, “opening” to the world and inviting the possibility of transformation – but I argue that the Olympic Opening Ceremony, rather, signals a confident nation asserting itself as coexisting, but culturally and spiritually altogether different from the West.

Zheng He—Symbol of China’s Rise

Zheng He is one of the primary symbols used to project this message, that China in 2008 is moving beyond “reform and opening,” characterized by economic liberalization and increased foreign direct investment, etc., and into a phase when China represents a new economic and political model, based on its unique culture and heritage. While NBC sees Zheng He only as a symbol of Chinese openness, in China he has symbolized the revival of China as a global super-power which, unlike the West, respects the sovereignty of others. The historiography of this figure will reveal how he became a powerful national symbol, used in the Olympic Ceremony and as a tool of Chinese diplomacy, to project China’s “peaceful rise” in the 21st century.

Though research first began in Japan and Europe, modern Chinese scholarship of Zheng He began with Liang Qichao (1873-1929), the influential scholar-journalist and reformer. While in exile in Japan, he published the seminal article, “*Zuguo da hanghaijia Zheng He zhuan*” (Biography of Zheng He, master mariner of the fatherland) (1904). Writing after the humiliating defeat of the Beiyang Navy by the Japanese in 1895, as foreign powers divided up his nation, Liang lamented China’s weak position at the end of the century by casting Zheng He as a model of China’s imaginable future.¹⁸ He criticized the discontinuation of the voyages, writing that while Chinese had begun the process of colonization then, now they were enslaved, like “oxen and horses.” Europeans now ruled where Chinese had only visited.¹⁹ After the 1911 revolution that ended the Qing rule, Zheng He began to appear in school textbooks and many popular publications, as an inspiring patriotic figure meant to rejuvenate a weakened nation.²⁰

This image of Zheng He, symbol of Chinese strength in the face of Western imperialism, does not explain the symbol of peace and friendship promoted in the Olympic Ceremony. This shift originates not in China, but at the University of Cambridge, where Professor Joseph Needham sought to radically challenge Eurocentric history and elevate Chinese accomplishments. In 1949, Needham began work on the multi-volume study *Science and Civilization in China*. Meticulously chronicling every achievement in Chinese science and engineering, Needham hoped to, in his own words, “redress a balance, which in the past tilted over much too far on the other side” towards

¹⁸ “Shipping News: Zheng He’s Sexcentenary,” *China Heritage Newsletter* No. 2, June 2005. http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/articles.php?searchterm=002_zhenghe.inc&issue=002.

¹⁹ J.R. Levenson, *Liang Ch’i-Cha’ao and the Mind of Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953), 124.

²⁰ The Information Office of the People’s Government of Fujian Province, *Zheng He’s Voyages down to the Western Seas* (China Intercontinental Press, 2005).

Eurocentrism,²¹ and to prove that “wisdom was not born with Europeans,” but had more often flowed from East to West.²² In so doing he hoped to overcome the Cold War animosities in the 1950s and bring about greater understanding between China and the West. But more than understanding, *Science and Civilization* was also a critique of Western arrogance and imperialism, motivated by Needham’s personal world view, which saw a peaceful, harmonious China as antithesis to a malevolent, chaotic West.²³

Nowhere is this more apparent than in his description of Zheng He’s voyages, appearing most extensively in the fourth volume (1971). Needham ignores the Emperor Yongle’s violent usurpation of the throne (1402), an essential historical context to the expeditions, and compares Zheng He to the Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama (d.1524) as equivalents. In the comparison, he strongly condemns European violence and praises the peacefulness of Chinese in their foreign relations. “Considering war and trade,” he writes, the contrast between the Chinese and Portuguese in Africa is “an extraordinary one, for while the Chinese operations were those of a navy paying friendly visits to foreign ports, the Portuguese east of the Suez engaged themselves in total war.” For the Chinese, “their impetus was mainly governmental, their trade (though large) was incidental.” Zheng He and his companions practiced “colonialism without imperialism,” displaying an “almost excessive urbanity,” and on “only three occasions got into difficulties and had to fight.” Needham goes into shocking detail of the gruesome exploits of the Portuguese, who subjected those they met “to all those forms of secret-police terror

²¹ Robert Finlay, “China, the West, and World History in Joseph Needham’s ‘Science and Civilization in China,’” *Journal of World History* Vol. 11, No. 2 (Fall, 2000), 283. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20078851>.

²² H. Holorenshaw, “The Making of an Honorary Taoist,” in *Changing Perspectives in the History of Science: Essays in Honour of Joseph Needham*, ed. Mikulás Teich and Robert Young (Boston, 1973), 1.

²³ Finlay, “China, the West, and World History in Joseph Needham’s ‘Science and Civilization in China.’”

which have disfigured our own century.” He decisively concludes, “In all the maritime contacts between Europe and Asia in that dramatic age our forefathers were quite sure who the ‘heathen’ were. Today we suspect that these were not the less civilized of the two.”²⁴

Needham was the first to bring Zheng He to a large Western audience, and his analysis was widely applauded and accepted, being included in works by world historians such as Janet L. Abu-Lughod, Fernand Braudel, K.N. Chaudhuri, Pierre Chaunu, Alfred Crosby, Andre Gunder Frank, E.L. Jones, David S. Landes, William H. McNeill, J.M. Roberts, and Immanuel Wallerstein.²⁵ To these historians, the contrast between the Chinese and Portuguese voyages served as a dramatic symbol for a turning point in world history: China, poised to stretch their empire across the globe, suddenly turned inward, and the indomitable (if savage) Europeans took their place, violently dominating the lands Zheng He had peacefully visited only two generations before. Thinking of Zheng He as an explorer, rather than a vassal of the Ming Emperor Yongle, they wondered what the world might have been had the Chinese voyages continued.

Such speculation culminated in Gavin Menzies’ sensational *1421: The Year China Discovered America* (2002), in which the author claims that Columbus, Vasco de Gama, Magellan and Cook followed Chinese maps on their so-called “journeys of discovery.” Using much questionable evidence, Menzies argues that Zheng He sailed around the Cape of Good Hope, and on to North America. The European explorers of the later 15th century supposedly set off with Chinese maps in hand; these men, Menzies

²⁴ Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China, Vol. 4: Physics and Physical Technology: Part III: Civil Engineering and Nautics* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 514-535.

²⁵ Finlay, “China, the West, and World History in Joseph Needham’s ‘Science and Civilization in China,’” 269.

writes, “stood on the shoulders of giants”.²⁶ While countless professional historians and oceanographers have refuted his claims and questioned his evidence, Menzies’ has undoubtedly been the most popular voice on Zheng He in the Western world, and has cemented the conception of him as “China’s own Christopher Columbus.”²⁷ However erroneous his claims, Menzies, like Needham, challenges Eurocentrism by denigrating Western heroes and putting Chinese achievements at the center of world history. But I argue that the popularity of *1421* is due less to the strength of its argument, than because it fed into a larger narrative of China’s rise and America’s decline at the turn of the millennium. The image of Zheng He’s massive 400 foot long treasure ships—bigger, stronger, and sailing a half century before Columbus’s tiny merchant vessels—echoed stories in the daily news that also pictured China as bigger, faster, stronger and smarter than a Bush-era America mired in unpopular foreign wars and economic stagnation. Contemplated at the end of the “American century”, Zheng He represented a time of absolute Chinese world superiority that they were seemingly resurrecting today.

The Chinese Government Invests in Zheng He

While some members of the Western academy sought alternative approaches to the dominant Eurocentric accounts of history during the 1980s, Chinese intellectuals became increasingly critical of the Chinese past, and urged Westernization. The controversial TV mini-series *River Elegy* (1988) captured a radical take on Chinese

²⁶ Gavin Menzies, *1421: The year China Discovered America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002), 429.

²⁷ Numerous refutations of Gavin Menzies’ *1421* are collected in: M.Y. Su, *Seven Epic Voyages of Zheng He: Facts, Fiction and Fabrication* (Torrance: self-published, 2005); and “1421 Exposed,” Geoffrey Wade, <http://www.1421exposed.com/>.

history, which depicted China's traditional culture as feudal, insular and ultra-stable. The show's message was that the only way forward for China was to become "blue"—to embrace modernization and Westernization.²⁸ This essentially Orientalist view, which saw Chinese culture as backward and Western culture as progressive, has roots in the May Fourth Movement of 1919. Student protestors of the 1980s similarly elevated the West as a way to critique and redirect their own culture.²⁹

After ordering the crackdown on the democracy movement on June fourth, 1989, a reeling Deng Xiaoping declared that "the greatest mistake in these ten years is the one made in education."³⁰ To foster national unity and prevent future challenges to CCP rule, he instituted the sweeping Patriotic Education campaign, which sought to "rejuvenate China's national spirit...reconstruct the sense of national esteem and dignity and build the broadest possible coalition under the leadership of the Communist Party."³¹ In the classroom, Marxist theory would now take a backseat to the teaching of history and tradition, of the nation's characteristics and realities and their incompatibility to Western values. Zheng He's mission, which had been constructed by Needham and his counterparts as symbol of China's scientific and moral superiority to the West, perfectly fit this agenda. In the words of two leading PRC scholars, "the achievements of Zheng He during his voyages to the Western Ocean have been excellent materials for conducting patriotic education for the Chinese nation."³²

²⁸ J. Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

²⁹ Xiaomei Chen, *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

³⁰ Samuel Wang, "Teaching Patriotism in China," *China Strategic Review* 1 (4), July 5, 1996: 13-17.

³¹ *Ibid.*: 15

³² Wade, Geoffrey Wade, "The Zheng He Voyages: A Reassessment," 1.

The Chinese state invested considerable resources in promoting the legend of Zheng He as a national super-hero over the last twenty years. Following the lead of American and European celebrations of the 500th Anniversary of Columbus's voyage to America in 1992, China began to prepare for the 600th anniversary of Zheng He's 1405 voyage.³³ In 1985, four research centers were established in China, the largest being the Nanjing Zheng He Research Association and Exhibition Hall. Publishing a quarterly magazine *Zheng He Studies*, this organization has promoted an idealized depiction of Zheng He as a symbol of peace, and as "China's own Christopher Columbus." In 2003-4, *1421: The Year China Discovered America* author Gavin Menzies was welcomed to China, given high praise by the Research Association, many speaking engagements, and an honorary professorship at Yunnan University.

Not only did Zheng He serve the cause of patriotism and national pride, but he also became an ideal symbol for later efforts under Party Secretary Hu Jintao to project China's "Peaceful Rise" in the 21st century under the leadership of the Communist Party. During the 1980s and 1990s, Deng Xiaoping, seeking to mitigate the enormous damage to China's international relations by the 1989 Tiananmen Square Incident, promoted the ideas "*taoguang yanghui*" ("hiding one's capacity while biding one's time") and "*budangtou*" ("not seeking to lead"). As China's stunning economic growth accelerated during the 1990s to 8% annually, and China was quickly surpassing Japan to become the second largest economy in the world, greater efforts were made to become more active in world affairs, and shape perception of China abroad. In 2002, Party Secretary Hu Jintao launched the "peaceful rise" (*heping jueqi*) slogan to allay foreign fears of China's

³³ M.Y. Su, *Seven Epic Voyages of Zheng He: Facts, Fiction and Fabrication*, 27.

expanding influence, and signal to Chinese the intent to contain civil unrest and improve domestic economic conditions.³⁴ In the words of one Chinese think tanker, the policy emphasizes that “rising” is the goal, “peace” is the condition, and it is important to “be on friendly terms with your neighbor.”³⁵ “Peaceful Rise” was especially directed towards ASEAN countries, assuring them that China’s new status as the largest Asian military power and trading partner would be a “win-win” for their smaller neighbors.

Zheng He became a central symbol of this state discourse, highlighting the historic relationship between China and its neighbors in South and Southeast Asia, a “golden age of exchange” that the Chinese Communist Party would create in modern terms. The 600th anniversary of Zheng He’s voyages in 2005 became a year-long promotion of China’s “peaceful rise”. Celebrations included the expositions in Shanghai and Beijing, the launching of several books, an eight-part TV documentary on China Central Television, and numerous seminars and conferences around the country.³⁶ Chinese communities in Singapore, Taiwan, Malaysia and Indonesia also organized their own celebrations of Zheng He in cooperation with the Chinese government. Beijing officials clearly articulated the political message of Zheng He. Vice-minister of Communication Xu Zuyuan, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, was in charge of these 2005 celebrations, and his words at a 2004 press release summed up the government depiction of the voyages: “The essence of Zheng’s voyages does not lie in

³⁴ Yongnian Zheng and Sow Keat Tok, “‘Harmonious Society’ and ‘Harmonious World’: China’s Policy Discourse under Hu Jintao,” *Briefing Series—Issue 26* (Nottingham: The University of Nottingham China Policy Institute, October, 2007), <http://nottingham.ac.uk/cpi/documents/briefings/briefing-26-harmonious-society-and-harmonious-world.pdf>.

³⁵ Bruce Klinger, “‘Peaceful Rising’ seeks to allay ‘China Threat,’” *Asia Times Online*, March 12, 2004, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/FC12Ad01.html>.

³⁶ “Zheng He Anniversary Highlights Peaceful Growth,” *China Daily*, July 12, 2005, http://www.china.org.cn/archive/2005-07/12/content_1134724.htm.

how strong the Chinese navy once was, but in that China adhered to a peaceful diplomacy when it was a big power... Instead of occupying a single piece of land, building a fort or seizing treasure, Zheng He treated other countries with friendship. We think the legacy of Zheng He's seven voyages to the west is that a 'peaceful rise' is the inevitable outcome of China's history."³⁷ The message downplays all of the fears posed by China's rise in the regional context, from the possibility of conflict with Taiwan, to disputes over the resources in the South China Sea, or the unpredictable consequences of China's domestic problems. While Zheng He stands in for a peaceful, powerful China today, the references to Western colonialists who did "occupy land" and "seize treasure" is also an allusion to the United States under George Bush. Both Washington's willingness to act unilaterally in Iraq and China's pursuit of a "peaceful rise" are pictured as the "inevitable outcome" of each society's own history.

This message is elaborated in the 2005 policy paper, *China's Peaceful Development Road*. Also included in this narrative is a twist on Needham's barbaric Portuguese—the Opium War here stands in to represent the expansionist West compared to harmonious China:

Peaceful Development is the Inevitable Way for China's Modernization

Looking back upon history, basing itself on the present reality and looking forward to the future, China will unswervingly follow the road of peaceful development, making great efforts to achieve a peaceful, open, cooperative and harmonious development.

It is an inevitable choice based on its national conditions that China persists unswervingly in taking the road of peaceful development. During the 100-odd years following the Opium War in 1840, China suffered humiliation and insult from big powers. And thus, ever since the advent of modern times, it has become the assiduously sought goal of the Chinese people to eliminate war, maintain peace, and build a country of independence and prosperity, and a comfortable and happy life for the people...

³⁷ C. Raja Mohan, "Debating China's 'Peaceful Rise': The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 39, No. 30 (August 14, 2004): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4415413>.

It is an inevitable choice based on China's historical and cultural tradition that China persists unswervingly in taking the road of peaceful development. The Chinese nation has always been a peace-loving one. Chinese culture is a pacific culture. The spirit of the Chinese people has always featured their longing for peace and pursuit of harmony. Six hundred years ago, Zheng He (1371-1435), the famous navigator of the Ming Dynasty, led the then largest fleet in the world and made seven voyages to the "Western Seas," reaching more than 30 countries and regions in Asia and Africa. What he took to the places he visited were tea, chinaware, silk and technology, but did not occupy an inch of any other's land. What he brought to the outside world was peace and civilization, which fully reflects the good faith of the ancient Chinese people in strengthening exchanges with relevant countries and their peoples. Based on the present reality, China's development has not only benefited the 1.3 billion Chinese people, but also brought large markets and development opportunities for countries throughout the world. China's development also helps to enhance the force for peace in the world.³⁸

This highly selective construction of history depicts China's "peaceful rise" as the "inevitable" outcome of their history. While Mao and the entire twentieth century are ignored, Zheng He and the Opium Wars alone make up this historical narrative which reveals the "spirit of the Chinese people" as driven towards "peace in the world", and the "big powers" of the West as driven to humiliate and exploit. What would Mao, who famously said, "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun," think of such a pacified image of the Chinese? Furthermore, what would China's ardent nationalists make of the conclusion that the lesson of the Opium Wars is that China should today seek peace, rather than military strength? But it is to combat such urges that the Party has turned to Zheng He, and the imperial past more broadly, to symbolize efforts to join the global economy without upsetting the status quo, an effort that overturns Mao's determination to make China self-sufficient and combat capitalism.

Rather than showing how the past determines China's present, this propaganda shows how history is produced in context of power. Reproducing Joseph Needham's image of an enlightened China peacefully touring the Indian Ocean, they neglect many essential facts: Zheng He travelled with a retinue of almost 27,000 soldiers, engaged in

³⁸ "China's Peaceful Development Road," The State Council Information Office, December 22, 2005, http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200512/22/print20051222_230059.html.

several battles and forcibly brought foreign leaders to pay tribute in Beijing; meanwhile his sponsor, the Emperor Yongle, was engaged in wars of domination in Yunnan and Vietnam, and endless campaigns against the Mongols. Zheng He himself was an accomplished military officer, promoted to lead the fleet because of his service to the Emperor during his violent struggle to usurp the throne. While it is true that the Ming voyages did not result in violent domination or imperialism, the Chinese tributary system is hardly the kind of “peace” we can admire today, defined by a Sinocentric world view that saw the emperor as ruler of “all under heaven,” and was marked by imperial condescension that encouraged loyalty and emphasized the inferiority of vassal states. Zheng He was not the equivalent of a modern day diplomat or merchant, approaching foreign kings as equals; he represented the military might and cultural superiority of China, and demanded that other countries accept Chinese suzerainty.³⁹

Nonetheless, this depiction of Zheng He has been utilized over and over in official discourse concerning China’s role in the world, of which the Olympic Opening Ceremony is but the most prominent example. In speeches in Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Africa, Chinese diplomats have used this account of Zheng He to imagine that China’s foreign policy today is a resumption of this earlier “golden age” of exchange. During an April, 2011 trip to Jakarta, Indonesia, Premier Wen Jiabao used the history of Zheng He to create a narrative of long, peaceful relations between China and this powerful ASEAN member. “Today, people in Semarang are still telling stories of how Zheng He, who visited the place during his voyages to the Western Seas, made friends with the local people.” Zheng He, who “did not take a single inch of foreign land,”

³⁹ For detailed refutations of the Chinese government’s account of Zheng He, see Geoffrey Wade, “The Zheng He Voyages: A Reassessment;” M.Y. Su, *Seven Epic Voyages of Zheng He: Facts, Fiction and Fabrication*; E.L. Dreyer, *Zheng He: China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty, 1405-1433*.

proves that today the Chinese will “keep good faith, build amicable ties, and treat others with respect...China cannot develop itself in isolation from the world. Nor can the world achieve prosperity without China.”⁴⁰ The history of Zheng He here reassures Indonesians that China will engage cooperatively with its neighbors, not seeking dominance (like the West), but mutual friendship and prosperity. As China seeks closer economic and political relations with ASEAN, African and Middle Eastern countries, the state has continued to draw upon Zheng He to shape perceptions of its role in the world today.

Imagining China as a Global Power

The power of “The Silk Road” performance in the Opening Ceremony is in its ability to use history to project China as an upcoming global power. The image of powerful Chinese sailors spreading Chinese civilization across the seas represented here draws upon a century of historiography, in which Zheng He was resurrected from obscurity and remade as a patriotic figure. While once condemned as a symbol of tyranny and bad governance, entering the twentieth century he seemed to embody everything China desperately lacked—a strong navy, a connection to the global economy, superior technology, and a powerful place at the center of world affairs. When China was weak at the end of the nineteenth century, Liang Qichao resurrected Zheng He as a symbol of strength. When China was discounted as backward, outside of progressive “history”, Joseph Needham cast Zheng He as a man of culture, intellect and morality, superior to his

⁴⁰ Mu Xuequan, “Full text of Chinese premier Wen Jiabao’s speech at Balai Kartini of Indonesia,” *Xinhuanet*, May 5, 2011. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-05/01/c_13853424.htm.

Western equivalents. When China was rising, Zheng He was re-imagined yet again, as an emissary of peace and friendship.

Such contradictory images remind us that history is built as much on what is remembered as on what is forgotten. And yet, despite current efforts by the Chinese government to cast Zheng He as symbol of peace, opposing aspects of his legend shine through, even in the Olympic Ceremony. Chinese Central Television commentators tell us that the Ming voyages “proved very strongly, that the civilized nation of China, from antiquity, has always been friendly and enthusiastic,” yet, as we watch thousands of perfectly coordinated sailors swing massive oars, we see an image of power more than peace. Like the original treasure ships, which carried thousands soldiers to force foreign countries to “acknowledge the power and majesty of Ming China and its emperor,” this show inspires awe more than it does trust or compassion. While the Chinese government invested massive resources into shaping the image of Zheng He to their own purposes, ultimately he remains a complex symbol which defies simplistic interpretation. As China’s economic, political and military power continues to grow, people around the world continue to contemplate Zheng He, searching for some insight into what China will make of its new-found global power today.

Chapter 2

The Four Great Inventions: Becoming a Scientific Superpower Once Again

*We are so proud of China's four great inventions [in the past]: the compass, paper-making, printing and gunpowder. But in the following centuries we did not keep up that pace of invention. Those inventions fully prove what the Chinese people are capable of doing—so why not now? We need to get back to that nature.*⁴¹

-Wu Qidi, Vice-minister of Education, 2005

The first act of the Opening Ceremony prominently depicts the “four great inventions” (*si da faming*) of ancient China—gunpowder, printing, papermaking and the compass. It begins with a massive display of fireworks designed by Chinese artist Cai Guoqiang, followed by an enormous paper scroll unfolding to become a centerpiece for the entire ceremony. The scroll becomes the material on which China’s history is portrayed, and fireworks punctuate the entire performance. A long segment representing printing blocks spell out the symbol *he* (harmony), and finally, an image of an ancient compass appears, representing the instrument that helped the Ming-era eunuch Zheng He sail to the Indian Ocean in the 15th century. The ceremony celebrates the four great inventions as China’s ancient contributions to the world, specifically Europe, and reaffirms contemporary desires to become a scientific superpower.

While the ceremony reinstates the four great inventions as China’s historical contributions to science and potential status as a scientific superpower, an exhibit concurrently displayed in the new China Science and Technology Museum, located near

⁴¹ Thomas Friedman, “From Gunpowder to the Next Big Bang,” *New York Times*, November 4, 2005, http://select.nytimes.com/2005/11/04/opinion/04friedman.html?_r=1.

the Bird's Nest stadium, showed a new and less familiar version. Hosted by the Chinese Ministry of Culture and the Beijing Olympic Organizing Committee, the exhibit, entitled "Heavenly Miracles—Exhibition of Ancient Chinese inventions," eliminated the compass and gunpowder, merged paper-making and printing into one and added porcelain, bronze and silk to the list.⁴² The former four inventions, curator Zhao Feng (vice-curator of the Chinese Silk Museum in Hangzhou) said, were chosen by Westerners, and no longer fully represented the highest level of ancient China's science and technology. With the new four great inventions, Zhao Feng meant to represent an authentically Chinese perspective, identifying the inventions from the center of China's civilization rather than that of Europe.⁴³

A debate arose over the exhibit amongst scholars and cultural critics, many of whom shared Zhao Feng's alienation with the European-born four great inventions and sought a China-centered list.⁴⁴ Historian Deng Yinke offered a critique along these lines in his 2010 book, *Ancient Chinese Inventions*:

It is doubtful that consideration of these four great inventions can reflect the achievements of scientific and technological inventions in ancient China precisely. The four inventions were regarded as the most important Chinese achievements in science and technology mainly because they had a prominent position in the exchanges between East and West, and acted as a powerful dynamic in promoting the development of capitalism in Europe. In fact the ancient Chinese achieved much more than the four major inventions: there were major developments in farming iron and copper metallurgy, exploitation of coal and petroleum, machinery, medicine, astronomy, mathematics, porcelain, silk, and wine making. The numerous inventions and discoveries related to people's livelihoods and

⁴² Dong Jirong, "Miracle of Nature's Engineering," *China Culture.org*, Accessed March 15, 2012. http://www.chinaculture.org/exchange/2008-08/19/content_141644.htm.

⁴³ Jin Yi, "Zhongguo keji guan zhanlan chongxin dingyi si da faming sichou deng ruxuan," = "China Science and Technology Museum exhibition to redefine the four great inventions," *Zhejiang Online - Evening News*, July 31, 2008. <http://news.163.com/08/0731/06/415KFQ0D0001124J.html>.

⁴⁴ "Do We Need to Redefine the Top Four Inventions?" *Beijing Review*, August 26, 2008. http://www.bjreview.com.cn/forum/txt/2008-08/26/content_146756.htm.

daily life advanced Chinese society. Many are at least as important as the four major inventions, and some are arguably even greater.⁴⁵

Here Deng Yinke, like Zhao Feng's "Heavenly Miracles" exhibit, says that the Chinese have achieved so much more than the narrow framework of the four great inventions can express. The "East meets West" message behind the original four great inventions made them an excellent symbol for the purposes of the Olympic Ceremony, which sought to represent China as connected to the global community, and especially the West. But in smaller venues targeting more domestic audiences, these historians sought a wider depiction of China's scientific history, valuing not only those inventions that influenced Europe, but those that changed China. In other words, they urged us to measure Chinese achievements by Chinese standards.

Zhao and Deng's desire to remake the four great inventions, however, overturns the symbol's long and distinguished European historiography, which, as most contemporary Chinese and Western sources suggest, stretches back to the European Renaissance. Well-known Western intellectuals Francis Bacon (1561-1626), Karl Marx (1818-1883), and Joseph Needham (1900-1995) all hailed the inventions as China's greatest contributions to world civilization. Not until the early twentieth century did the concept of the "four great inventions" enter Chinese consciousness, when they were introduced by an American-trained Chinese scholar in 1930. The great inventions were later integrated into KMT and Communist accounts of China's imperial history in the 1940s, and became the subject of countless publications in 1950s PRC. Since then, the four great inventions have become a ubiquitous symbol of China's past achievements and status, a part of every elementary school curriculum in the PRC. Audiences of the

⁴⁵ Deng Yinke, *Ancient Chinese Inventions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 14.

Olympic opening ceremony voted the segment as the most moving part of the show and the best display of Chinese culture and characteristics.⁴⁶ But more than an innate capacity for science, the four great inventions have come to represent China's capacity for "greatness", calling up a time in pre-modern history when China was technologically superior to the West and admired by its leading intellectuals, a status confirmed by the many famous Europeans who have written of the inventions over the centuries that Zhao Feng's new list fails to communicate.

Differences over history belied deeper questions over cultural authenticity and national values facing China during the Olympic moment. In 2008, when the West faced a deep financial crisis and China was emerging as the second largest world economy, must China continue to measure its achievements by Western standards? Could a symbol of China conceived of by Europeans really be authentically Chinese? As China rose to become a world superpower, what legacy would it receive from the imperial past? Zhao Feng's Science Museum exhibit reproduced all the symbols of China's pre-modern imperial power—porcelain, bronze, writing and silk—as the key components of China's artistic traditions. The porcelain-ware, bronze ceremonial vessels, calligraphy, textiles and painting produced in China became the dominant artistic culture in the region for millennia, and are testament to the "Middle Kingdom's" place at the center of cultural, political and economic world power, making them, in Zhao's eyes, the most important legacy for modern China. On the other hand, the four great inventions in the Olympic Ceremony—gunpowder, the compass, printing and paper—have always been associated with the rise of European power, having enabled the age of exploration, colonialism, and

⁴⁶ "'Four Great Inventions' at Olympic Opening warmly-welcomed," Peoples Daily Online, August 15, 2008, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90776/6476950.html>.

industrial revolution in Europe. They stood as a tribute not to China's imperial culture, but to China's ability to enable European greatness. In this chapter, I will examine the five-hundred year historiography of these symbols, examining how they was constructed in both East and West to establish, and justify, an unequal relationship between the two. Finally, I will show how the four great inventions emerged as a patriotic national symbol in the 2008 Olympics as a way to assert Chinese status as a global superpower.

The Renaissance: The Three Great Inventions

Almost every mention of the four great inventions in China today accredits famous European scholars such as Francis Bacon and Karl Marx as confirming their importance and influence, and by extension, the influence of China on the West. This introduction from a 1998 history of Chinese printing, published in Taiwan, is a typical example: "China's ancient discovery of the art of printing made a magnificent contribution to the civilization of mankind and progress. Famous world personalities such as Marx, Hugo, and Bacon all in the past gave it a high evaluation."⁴⁷ A 1999 popular history book published in Taiwan on the four great inventions similarly proclaims: "Francis Bacon praised China's four great discoveries as having 'changed the whole face and state of things throughout the world.'"⁴⁸ These descriptions give the impression that Bacon and Marx were great admirers of China—in fact, these philosophers were unaware of the Chinese origins of the inventions. While Chinese today claim the four great

⁴⁷ Li Shouren in his preface to Zhang Shudong et al., *Zhonghua yin shua tong shi = A General History of Chinese Printing* (Taipei: Cai Yuan fa ren yin shua chuanbo Yingcai wang jiao jinhui, 1998).

⁴⁸ Zhang Mianzhi, *Wen Ming de Tui Shou: Zhongguo de Si Da Fa Ming = The Driving Force of Civilization: China's Four Great Inventions* (Taipei: Wanjuanlou tushu youxian gongsi, 1999), 2.

inventions as national achievements, these thinkers, contemplating the role of science in the development of civilization, saw them as products of the universal human capacity for discovery. Rather than how societies had developed science, a history that was murky to them anyhow, they emphasized how science had changed society, toppled empires and transformed daily life, radically and irreversibly.

Even though these thinkers on the great inventions have been misrepresented by modern observers, their conception of science and technology as a powerful, revolutionary force is still dominant today, a belief underlying the four great inventions.

Francis Bacon in his *Novum Organum*, published in 1620, wrote:

It is well to observe the force and virtue and consequences of discoveries; and these are to be seen nowhere more conspicuously than in those three which were unknown to the ancients, and of which the origin, though recent, is obscure and inglorious; namely, printing, gunpowder, and the magnet. For these three have changed the whole face and state of things throughout the world; the first in literature, the second in warfare, the third in navigation; whence have followed innumerable changes; insomuch that no empire, no sect, no star seems to have exerted greater power and influence in human affairs than these mechanical discoveries.⁴⁹

Bacon, a modernist and experimental philosopher, was arguing against his Renaissance contemporaries, who believed that the golden age of ancient Rome would never be surpassed. Urging his contemporaries to look forward rather than backward, Bacon argued that those “mechanical discoveries”, unknown in the times of ancient Rome, held the promise of historical progress and scientific pursuits benefiting mankind.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum: Book I. Aph 129*, Trans. James Spedding. [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Novum_Organum/Book_I_\(Spedding\)](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Novum_Organum/Book_I_(Spedding)).

⁵⁰ Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China, Volume 4: Physics and Physical Technology, Part II: Mechanical Technology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 2.

In the nineteenth century, Karl Marx would likewise identify the three inventions as prerequisites of the modern age, triggering Europe's transition from feudalism to capitalism. In 1861 he wrote,

Gunpowder, the compass, and the printing press were the three great inventions which ushered in bourgeois society. Gunpowder blew up the knightly class, the compass discovered the world market and founded the colonies, and the printing press was the instrument of Protestantism and the regeneration of science in general; the most powerful lever for creating the intellectual prerequisites.⁵¹

In this often quoted passage, Marx makes a vivid case for technology as the cause of historical change, empowering the bourgeois class, and spurring the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe. Marx has alternatively been read as saying that class struggle, not technology, is the fundamental cause of historical change, a message which the Party has tried to downplay since economic reforms beginning in 1978. By tying Marx to the four great inventions, the Chinese government both implies his admiration of China, but more importantly calls upon the founder of communism to support their post-1978 focus on scientific and technological modernization as the correct way to build socialism.⁵²

Colonial Europe: "Fetus in a Jar"

The idea that science and technology were the primary cause of historical change was contrary to the view of Christian missionaries, who believed Christianity was the

⁵¹ Karl Marx, "Division of Labour and Mechanical Workshop. Tool and Machinery," in *Marx's Economic Manuscripts of 1861-63, Part 3: Relative Surplus Value. Volume 33, MECW*, 387-477. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1861/economic/ch35.htm>.

⁵² For the debate concerning what Marx saw as the cause of the transition from Feudalism to Capitalism, see: Claudio Katz, *From Feudalism to Capitalism: Marxian Theories of Class Struggle and Social Change* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989).

wellspring of scientific thought and modernity. To them, the great inventions symbolize the difference between East and West – technology could be discovered in China, but only in the hands of enlightened Christians could these inventions be improved and developed to their full potential. Through conversion, they argued, China could hope to gain all the benefits of Western civilization.

As early as the sixteenth century, Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci, who depicted China as an otherwise monolithic, enlightened and stable empire, saw Chinese thought as lacking clarity and logic. Encountering resistance to his conversion efforts, he wrote that the Chinese have no “conception of the rules of logic,” and that “the science of ethics for them is a series of confused maxims and deductions.” Though “at one time they were quite proficient in arithmetic and geometry, in the study and teaching of these branches of learning they labored with more or less confusion.”⁵³ For Ricci and the missionaries who followed him, failure to accept Christianity equated to a failure of reasoning. His notion that Chinese lacked reasoning, and that their best days in math and science were behind them would become more prevalent, overshadowing what was a largely positive description of Chinese civilization.

Enlightenment philosophers like Voltaire, Leibnitz, and Quesnay, drew from the writings of Ricci and other missionaries to create an idealized China marked by political stability and religious tolerance. Their image of China was actually a critique of a despotic Europe, wracked by war and religious strife.⁵⁴ But they also replicated and embellished Ricci’s critique that China lacked science and reasoning, thereby bolstering

⁵³ Matteo Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matteo Ricci, 1583-1610* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1953), Ed. and trans. Louis Gallagher.

⁵⁴ J.G. Lutz, *Opening China: Karl F.A. Gützlaff and Sino-Western relations, 1827-1852* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 125.

their own image of the West as an enlightened, scientific civilization. In his writings on China in 1756, Voltaire sees its great inventions as symbolizing Chinese failure to develop to their full potential because they lack Europe's progressive scientific qualities:

It is surprising that this people, so happy at inventions, have never penetrated beyond the elements of geometry; that in music they are even ignorant of semitones; and that their astronomy, with all their other sciences, should be at once so ancient and imperfect. Nature seems to have bestowed on this species of men, so different from the Europeans, organs sufficient to discover all at once, what was necessary to their happiness, but incapable to proceed further: we, on the other hand, were tardy in our discoveries; but then we have speedily brought everything to perfection.⁵⁵

Voltaire suggests that China's inventions are not a sign of its genius, but its child-like nature. Chinese happily stumble upon discoveries but lack the desire or capability of mind to develop them. In his narrative, the past belongs to China, but the future clearly belongs to the more progressive and capable, though late-coming Europeans. Voltaire faults a Chinese reverence for the past and the nature of their language for this stagnation, with clearly racial undertones in this passage.⁵⁶ Moving into the nineteenth century, the great inventions would continue to serve as a point of historical comparison, supposedly proving that only in enlightened, Christian Europe could scientific and technological discovery truly lead to historical progress.

A century later, missionary-scholars Walter Medhurst and Joseph Edkins returned to the great inventions, which they used to illustrate China's superiority to other non-Christian civilizations, but ultimately its inferiority to the West. In his 1838 *China: Its State and Prospects, with Special Reference to the Spread of the Gospel*, Medhurst recognizes the three inventions as demonstrating that the "heathen" Chinese exhibited

⁵⁵ Voltaire, *The Works of Voltaire: A Contemporary Version, Volume 13, part 1* (Akron: St. Hubert Guild, 1901), 28.

⁵⁶ Jonathan D. Spence, *The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds* (New York: Norton, 1998), 97.

“many traces of civilization, and displaying them at a period when the rest of mankind were for the most part sunk in barbarism.”⁵⁷ He begrudgingly acknowledged the “inventive genius” of the Chinese, and their contribution to European science, writing, “three most important discoveries, which have given an extraordinary impulse to the progress of civilization in Europe, were known to the Chinese previous to their being found out by us.” Medhurst’s cuts against the typical Orientalist depiction of China as backward, decadent and amoral. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said describes how “the Orient accommodated to the moral exigencies of Western Christianity”⁵⁸, providing an image of a heathen, barbaric East to affirm the virtuosity of Victorian culture, in which Christianity was seen as precondition for civilization and morality. Medhurst, who wrote numerous substantial reference works, including a Chinese-English Dictionary and a translation of the bible, sought a greater understanding of China for the purpose of proselytizing. His depiction of the Chinese sought to convince the audience back home that it was possible to understand the Chinese, and that they were worth saving.

But ultimately, the Congregationalist missionary wanted to explain scientific progress as a product of Christianity. While their achievements are impressive as a “heathen” country, without Christianity China could not hope to rise to European standards, and the great inventions remained as an anomaly rather than a defining achievement. Medhurst saw this born out by the disparities between present day Europe and China. He writes that China lacks “that high degree of improvement, and those well-defined civil rights, which are in a great measure the effects of Christianity.” Neither does

⁵⁷ Walter Medhurst, *China: Its State and Prospects, with Special Reference to the Spread of the Gospel; Containing Allusions to the Antiquity, Extent, Population, Civilization, Literature, and Religion of the Chinese* (Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1838), 87.

⁵⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin, 1978), 67.

China possess those “advances in science, or improvements in the arts, which so distinguish Europe, and which are the result of that march of mind so characteristic of the age we live in. Railways, tunnels, machinery, and all the ramifications and operations of gas and steam, are not to be looked for in China.”⁵⁹ He even faults the printing press as contributing to China’s stagnation, as it had enabled them to easily reproduce ancient works, discouraging the compilation of new ones.⁶⁰ According to Medhurst, the three great inventions are testament to China’s stature as a civilized country, and Europeans ought to “accord due heed to praise to those who so early possessed” them; but they also symbolize their failure to develop them into the epoch changing technologies that had enabled the “railways, tunnels, and machinery” of Europe’s Industrial Revolution.

The fourth great invention – papermaking – was first added by fellow missionary and scholar Joseph Edkins. In a comparison between Japan and China, Edkins, a great translator of scientific works into Chinese, wrote in 1893, “It should be always remembered that they [Japan] boast of no remarkable inventions and discoveries, such as printing, papermaking, the properties of loadstone [sic], and its use in navigation... They must not be then regarded as equal with the Chinese for those things that constitute a great nation.”⁶¹ Edkins was reacting to the rise of Meiji Japan, a nation that had impressed Europeans with the quick acquisition of Western science, industry and military technology. Despite China’s contemporary weakness, Edkins uses the four great

⁵⁹ Medhurst, *China: Its State and Prospects...*, 98.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁶¹ Joseph Edkins, *Religion in China; containing a brief account of the three religions of the Chinese: with observations on the prospects of Christian conversion amongst that people*, (London: K. Paul, Trench, Truöbner, & co., 1893).

inventions to convince readers that China is the birthplace of Asian civilization and Japan its derivative, and is “worthy of closer study,” not to mention missionary effort.

By the end of the 19th century, Chinese superiority did indeed seem like a distant memory. The great inventions no longer stood for the power of technology to change society, but for the unequal biological and intellectual capacities of societies to turn technology into power. More than anything, they became a way to assert European superiority over China by dismissing Chinese achievements. Victor Hugo expressed this in grotesque, scientific language in his 1862 novel *The Laughing Man*:

China had all our inventions before us, printing, artillery, aërostation, chloroform. Only, the discovery which in Europe immediately acquires life and growth, and becomes a prodigy and a marvel, remains an embryo in China, and is there preserved in a dead condition. China is a fetus in a jar.⁶²

Hugo’s metaphor provides a grotesque image of Chinese in a perpetually undeveloped state, a dead object for scientific study. The great inventions were seen as the source of revolutionary change by Francis Bacon and Karl Marx, but in China, Hugo observes, every discovery “remains an embryo”. Missionaries of the colonial era concluded that Christianity enabled Europe’s advances, but other qualities were identified—religion, race, power of intellect—which explained the scientific and military superiority of Europe over the formerly great China. The four great inventions expressed a narrative of early Chinese success, but inevitable stagnation and decline.

⁶² Victor Hugo, Isabel Florence Hapgood, Helen B. Dole, Huntington Smith, and Arabella Ward, *The Works of Victor Hugo: The Man Who Laughs: A Romance of English History* (T. Y. Crowell & Company, 1887), 39.

Early Twentieth Century China: The Great Contributions

Most Chinese accounts of the great inventions hide their Chinese historiography, depicting them as solely a European expression of their awe and gratitude for China's ancient ingenuity.⁶³ As I have shown, this is a misreading of the European historical context, which began without direct reference to China and later developed into a narrative of Chinese inferiority and European superiority. It was not until the appearance of Thomas Francis Carter's 1925 classic, *The Invention of Printing in China and its Spread Westwards* that Chinese intellectuals took notice of the great inventions, and appropriated *si da faming* as a patriotic symbol.⁶⁴

After working as an educator in rural China for more than ten years, in 1921 Carter was inspired to write *The Invention of Printing* when he came across a brief reference to the four great inventions in a British book on religion in China.⁶⁵ Focusing on printing exclusively, Carter sought conclusive proof of its Chinese origins, and collected a mass of evidence from around the continent tracking its transference to Europe. The introductory passage sets the tone for Carter's book, which cast a much more positive light on China: "Four great inventions that spread through Europe at the beginning of the Renaissance had a large share in creating the modern world... In these inventions and others as well, China claims to have had a conspicuous part."⁶⁶ His work had an immediate impact in China, where Chinese now began to put more emphasis on

⁶³ Thanks goes out to Dr. Endymion Wilkinson, whose historiography of the four great inventions in his forthcoming *Chinese History: A New Manual* (Harvard University Press) provided many of the sources referenced in this section.

⁶⁴ Christopher A. Reed, *Gutenberg in Shanghai: Chinese Print Capitalism, 1876-1937* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003).

⁶⁵ Thomas Francis Carter, Revised by L. Carrington Goodrich, *The Inventions of Printing in China and its Spread Westward, Second Ed.* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1955), xix.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, ix.

their history of science and technology, and especially printing, as an aspect of national identity.⁶⁷ An early example of this came in 1927, in China's first modern history of journalism published in Shanghai. Here, Ge Gongzhen introduced readers to Guttenberg, the German who invented movable type in 1439, only to emphasize that the Chinese had invented the same technology hundreds of years earlier:

Westerners take the German *Gu-teng-bao* (Guttenberg [sic]) as the ancestor of civilization and do not know that his inventions of movable type was already 500 years late... Printing was one of the technologies passed from China to the West. The book *The Inventions of Printing in China*, written by the American Mr. Ka-de [Carter] records this in particularly great detail.⁶⁸

Here, Ge asserts that movable type was originally a Chinese invention, suggesting the Guttenberg was not the true “ancestor of civilization,” but a latecomer at best.

This nationalist take on Carter's book set the stage for the introduction of *si da faming* as a patriotic symbol.

The first reference to the four great inventions appeared in China in 1930, in an article on printing by Jue Ming (the courtesy name of Xiang Da), “An Investigation into one of the four great inventions” (*si da faming kao zhi yi*).⁶⁹ Xiang Da was a historian and specialist in Sino-foreign relations, who had studied at Oxford University. In 1926-1943, he translated Thomas Carter's *The Inventions of Printing* into Chinese. It is reasonable to assume that Xiang Da took the term *si da faming* from Carter for his 1930 article, which introduced the “four great inventions” into the Chinese lexicon and reproduced Carter's

⁶⁷ Reed, *Guttenberg in Shanghai...*, 13.

⁶⁸ Gongzhen Ge, *Zhongguo baoxue shi* = A History of Journalism in China (Shanghai: 1927), 311.

⁶⁹ Xiang Da was also the first Chinese historian to draw together the Chinese sources documenting Zheng He's voyages, in the 1929 article “*Guanyu Sanbao Taijian xia Xiyang de jizhong ziliao*” = *Several documents concerning the voyages of the Three Treasure Eunuch to the West*.

message that China had played a “conspicuous part” in the development of world civilization, in which Europe was a latecomer.

Nevertheless, not everyone was ready to subscribe to the new assertion of Chinese scientific ingenuity in the 1930s. Responding to this growing interest in the history of Chinese science, technology and invention, in 1933 famed literary figure Lu Xun satirized efforts to cast the inventions as objects of national pride. He wrote, “Abroad, gunpowder was used to make bullets to fire at the enemy; in China, to make bamboo fire-crackers to ward off evil spirits. Abroad the compass was used to navigate the oceans; in China, it was used for fengshui.”⁷⁰ His appraisal closely resembles that of Voltaire, who saw the inventions as a failure of Chinese culture compared to the dynamism of modern Europe. But Lu Xun’s comparison here is part of a larger cultural critique central to the New Culture movement which he led, arguing that Chinese people had been hopelessly ignorant, squandering their energies on material extravagance and superstition. Meanwhile, Europeans had put the inventions to more modern purposes—war, exploration and territorial expansion. Ge Gongzhen and Xiang Da’s formulation of the four great inventions urged Chinese to look to their past for pride and inspiration; Lu Xun and other May Fourth Movement iconoclasts sought to repudiate the past, insofar to instill progressive, individualistic values in the newly formed Republic of China.

When Mao Zedong and his comrades in Yanan wrote of the four great inventions in *The Chinese Revolution and the CCP* (1939), they represented a patriotic, nationalist symbol. The opening chapter, “Chinese Society”, identifies the inventions with the peasants and craftsmen of China’s 4,000 year long “feudal” period:

⁷⁰ Lu Xun, *Ziyou tan—Shuidian de libi = Talking of Freedom—The Advantages and Disadvantages of Hydroelectricity* (Shanghai: Shenbao, 1933).

Throughout the history of Chinese civilization its agriculture and handicrafts have been renowned for their high level of development; there have been many great thinkers, scientists, inventors, statesmen, soldiers, men of letters and artists, and we have a rich store of classical works. The compass was invented in China very long ago. The art of paper-making was discovered as early as 1,800 years ago. Block-printing was invented 1,300 years ago. In addition, moveable types were invented 800 years ago. Gunpowder was also used in China earlier than in Europe. Thus China has one of the oldest civilizations in the world; she has a recorded history of nearly 4,000 years.⁷¹

Mao, departing from Lu Xun's iconoclastic view, salvaged the four great inventions as evidence of China's "splendid historical heritage." Rather than rejecting whole-sale China's "feudal" past, Mao sought to connect elements of this past to the Communist revolution in the 1930s and 1940s. While rejecting the "feudal" system of China's imperial past, he celebrates the four inventions as products of the laborers and craftspeople. Already well-known by 1930, the inventions were taken by Mao as symbol of the "industriousness and stamina" of the Chinese people, of Chinese superiority over Europe, and a source of patriotic inspiration during the war against Japan.

In 1950, a year after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Harvard PhD scholar Zhou Yiliang inaugurated the appearance of dozens of articles and books celebrating China's four great inventions in more explicitly class-terms. His article "Paper and the art of printing—China's glorious contributions to world culture" (*Zhi yu yinshuashu—Zhongguo dui shijie wenming de weida gongxian*) set the tone for years to come:

For three thousand years the achievements of the Chinese people in literature, history, science, and in fine arts and handicrafts have been recognized down to today throughout the world. In the technical discoveries and inventions one can see even more clearly the

⁷¹ Mao Zedong, *The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press).

crystallization of the intelligence and wisdom of China's laboring people. Silk reeling, paper making, printing, movable type, and the compass, etc., etc. not only enriched us, but were a contribution to the people of the entire world⁷²

Marx's argument that the great inventions had led to the birth of the bourgeois class is ignored in this effort to cast the four great inventions as the Chinese "laboring people's" gift to the world. Zhou explains the importance of the topic, and its underlying value to the Chinese state: "Our ancestors' inventions and creations all helped the people of foreign countries and therefore they are excellent materials for studying how to link patriotism and internationalism." Zhou, even more so than Mao in his 1939 text, uses the four inventions as a precedent of PRC efforts in the early 1950s to be a leader in world communism. A vital component of this effort was the exchange of science and technology, this time coming from West to East, as the Soviet Union extended technology and scientific training to the PRC. At a time when China was rebuilding and making large strides to industrialization, the four great inventions allowed writers to depict China as the advanced, world leader the Chinese Communist leadership said it would become. By 1958, the state had published popular books by reputable scholars on all four great inventions. The four great inventions were henceforth included in every encyclopedia, dictionary and school history book, becoming a prominent symbol in CCP historiography.

Cambridge professor Joseph Needham's multi-volume *Science and Civilization in China* (1954-2008) confirmed and expanded upon the CCP depiction of the four great inventions as China's great contribution to the world. His thesis that scientific progress

⁷² Zhou Yiliang, "Zhi yu yinshuashu—Zhongguo dui shijie wenming de weida gongxian" = "Paper and the Art of Printing—China's Glorious Contributions to World Culture," *Xinhua yuekan*, 1951.4, 186–89.

had mostly begun in the East and been diffused to the West, setting off the agricultural and later industrial revolution in Europe was a radical challenge to the Eurocentric views of his contemporaries. Though previous Western scholars had recognized China's influence, the scope of Needham's research went far beyond his predecessors. Besides the great four, his series on Chinese inventions would show that hundreds of inventions had originated in China in the realms of metallurgy, extraction of coal and petroleum, farming, manufacture of cotton and silk fabrics, Chinese medicine, astronomy, mathematics, pottery and porcelain, musical tuning, architecture, mechanical engineering, and water conservation. Undoubtedly the most important modern, Western voice on China's history of science and technology, Needham brought China's great inventions to the attention of a wider Western audience, challenging the claim of European superiority made in the nineteenth century.

In sum, the symbolism of the four great inventions flourished and gained power in China during the mid twentieth century, transforming from a symbol of China's failure to develop scientific modernity into one of China's success to become a global forerunner as such. As China struggled to become a modern nation-state after establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, the four great inventions served as a powerful symbol of the national past, showing that China had possessed all the essentials of modernity long before the West. Far removed from the theoretical ponderings of Bacon or Marx, or even the historical inquiries of Carter and Needham, Chinese like Mao Zedong, Xiang Da and Zhou Yiliang appropriated the great inventions to represent national status. The four great inventions now established China as teacher and the West as student, and the great inventions as great contributions. It is precisely this formulation that Zhao Feng criticizes

in his 2008 exhibit at the Chinese Museum of Science, which sought to redefine the four great inventions based on China's development rather than Europe's, and he criticized the four great inventions as a Western-made symbol. However, it is not Marx, Bacon or Needham who he overturns, but Mao and the Party-historians of the mid-twentieth century, who established China's national status based upon a historical relationship with the West.

The 1980s-Today: Science and Modernity in Reform Era China

Although scholars in East and West recognized China's scientific past, Mao's rule was disastrous for science and higher education in the People's Republic. Though the official number of scientists and technicians grew enormously, from 425,000 in 1952 to 5 million in 1979⁷³, they had been treated as politically suspect. The Anti-rightist movement of 1957 especially devastated the Chinese scientific community, many of whom were Western-trained and from landlord or bourgeois backgrounds. The withdrawal of Soviet assistance in 1960 and a national policy of self-reliance further isolated Chinese scientists, effectively cutting off all access off to foreign technology. Even more crippling was the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) which practically dismantled the system of higher education, disrupted research, and demoralized the intelligentsia, who were even more frequent targets of purges.⁷⁴

⁷³ Tong Dalian and Ju Ping, "Science and Technology," in *China's Socialist Modernization*, ed. Yu Guangyuan (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1984), 644.

⁷⁴ Maurice Meisner, *The Deng Xiaoping Era* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 197.

When Deng Xiaoping came to power in 1978, he immediately set about reversing these policies, restoring the educational system and promising the technological elite prestige and status. Seeking to convince veteran Maoists to accept this more “scientific” (rather than revolutionary) approach to leadership, he used the four great inventions to portray science and technology as both the object of national strength and pride, and also stressed the value of global intellectual exchange – two central messages of Deng Xiaoping’s “reform and opening up”.

In his critical 1978 speech at the Opening Ceremony of the National Conference on Science, Deng portrayed the four great inventions as a legacy to which China has failed to live up.

Comrade Mao Zedong often reminded us that China ought to make a greater contribution to humanity. In ancient times, China scored brilliant achievements in science and technology; its four great inventions [paper, printing, the compass and gunpowder] played a major role in advancing world civilization. We should not rest on our ancestors' achievements; rather such achievements should strengthen our resolve to catch up with and surpass the countries that are most advanced in science and technology. Our present contributions in these fields are far from commensurate with the standing of a socialist country such as ours.⁷⁵

While pointing out China’s scientific backwardness, Deng uses this symbol from China’s past to suggest the nation’s potential to score future “brilliant achievements”. It also underscores the central message of Deng’s reform efforts, to pursue the “four modernizations”—agriculture, industry, national defence and, most importantly, science and technology. He cleverly uses Mao’s own words to support what was in fact a radical overturning of his Cultural Revolution policies, thereby reinterpreting Maoism rather than directly criticizing it. Including Mao and the four great inventions gives a sense that

⁷⁵ Deng Xiaoping, “Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the National Conference on Science,” (Beijing, March 18, 1978), http://www.china.org.cn/features/dengxiaoping/2004-08/10/content_1103390.htm.

pursuing the “four modernizations” is not a turn away from China’s national trajectory (which it undoubtedly was), but a fulfillment of its destiny, a return to the nation’s Maoist, and even ancient, character.

Since the reform period, the four great inventions have occupied this dual position, as a familiar source of national pride, and an unfulfilled promise of the scientific superpower status China is yet to reclaim. On the one hand, they are a state sponsored symbol of China’s history. Since the 1990s, Patriotic Education campaigns have been featuring them to instill nationalist pride in youth. In some classrooms, portraits of the four Chinese sages responsible for these four great inventions have replaced the four Western heroes of Communism, Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, suggesting that rather than universal communist ideology, China’s glorious past is now more central to national unity and identity.⁷⁶ On the other hand, government and cultural figures frequently criticize Chinese for resting on the laurels of their past and, like Deng Xiaoping, emphasize how much is yet to be accomplished today. This aspect of the four great inventions is redeployed in the quote beginning this chapter: lamenting the lack of intellectual property and its effects on science in China, Wu Qidi, China's vice minister of education said in 2005, “We are so proud of China's four great inventions [in the past]: the compass, paper-making, printing and gunpowder. But in the following centuries we did not keep up that pace of invention. Those inventions fully prove what the Chinese people are capable of doing—so why not now? We need to get back to that nature.”⁷⁷ The Qing Dynasty to the present, Wu Qidi suggests, were an aberration in a longer history of

⁷⁶ Jasper Becker, *The Chinese*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 202.

⁷⁷ Friedman, “From Gunpowder to the Next Big Bang.”

Chinese dominance in science and technology, a glorious past which the Party seeks to recreate today.

It is precisely this sense of recovering a lost “nature” which animates the four great inventions as a symbol of China’s rise in the Olympic Opening Ceremony. Forget the Qing, forget revolution, and especially forget Mao—the four great inventions, the ceremony suggests, represent the true “nature” of the Chinese. And yet, as I have shown, the four great inventions as a national symbol are not wholly “Chinese”; rather, they reveal the entanglements between East and West in the construction of Chinese “nature” that cannot be undone. Zhao Feng’s attempt to create a more China-centered list of inventions in his exhibit at the Museum of Science and Technology essentially wrote the West out of China’s past. Does this replace Eurocentrism of the original four great inventions with an equally narrow Sinocentrism? Perhaps. But it also challenged what has been the essence of the four great inventions as a historical symbol for centuries, in establishing a status relationship between China and the West.

My investigation here has shown that rather than some positive characteristics of Chinese “nature”, the four great inventions represent a bygone era of Chinese superiority, before Western colonialism and industrial revolution when Europe was a backwater and China was the most advanced, most powerful, most refined civilization in the world. It is not the inventions themselves, but the image of all those great Western thinkers—Marx, Bacon, Carter, Needham—(supposedly) paying homage to China that empowers the four great inventions as symbol of China’s 21st century rise. Under the guidance of the Party, the ceremony suggests, China will return to its “natural” state as a world power, superior to the West. Zhao Feng, Deng Yinke and others have understood the inadequacy of this

kind of glorious history, which offers little to contemporary Chinese besides a misplaced sense of superiority.

Chapter 3

Confucius: Redefining Asian Values

*Although the economy is developing, there are more and more problems in the world, between man and nature and among people...It's natural for people turn to the philosophy of Confucius, whose ideas about harmony more than 2,000 years ago can be solutions to many of today's problems.*⁷⁸

-Professor Zhang Yiwu, Peiking University, 2008

Near the beginning of the Opening Ceremony, Confucianism, in its modern guise as marker of Chinese traditional culture and morality, appears on stage to welcome the world to Beijing. Following the rousing countdown of beating drums that opened the ceremony, three thousand Confucian scholars in caps and robes fill the Bird's Nest Stadium, forming a massive circle. Holding bamboo scrolls, they chant lines from the *Analects*, beginning with the second: "To have friends coming from afar: is this not a delight?" (*you pen zi yuanfang lai, bu yi le hu*). Though originally followed by "A gentleman is easy going and free; a vulgar man is always tense and fretful" (*junzi tan dangdang, xiaoren chang qi*), the overseer for the Ceremony, Zhang Heping, said this line "had no particularly positive connotation and could lead to misinterpretation."⁷⁹ The line was replaced by the less ambiguous, "all within the Four Seas are his brothers" (*sihai zhi nei, jie xiongdi ye*). Repackaging Confucianism for an international audience, Zhang

⁷⁸ "Confucius back in style in modern China," *China Daily*, Aug 9, 2008, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90782/90873/6470242.html>.

⁷⁹ Geremie Barmé, "China's Flat Earth: History and 8 August 2008," *The China Quarterly* 197 (2009): 64.

Heping, said that these quotations “expressed traditional Chinese values,”⁸⁰ while downplaying state efforts to put their own brand of Confucianism back into the center of Chinese political culture and national identity. The chanting of the scholars gives way to an undulating square of type-face blocks, representing printing, one of China’s four great inventions. The blocks surge up and down, collectively spelling out only one character in three styles of Chinese script: harmony (*he*). The principle is underlined by the perfectly coordinated choreography of the fifteen-thousand performers who enact the Opening Ceremony.

Here, the Chinese government has used this new incarnation of Confucianism to present themselves as the sole arbiter of social and political change, the guardian of Asian values and Chinese identity. During the 2005 National People’s Congress, the Hu Jintao administration inaugurated this effort under the banner of “building a harmonious society” (*hexie shehui*), an idea derived from Confucius that permeates the Olympic Ceremony. Singling out the Confucian ideal of harmony (*he xie*)—an ubiquitous slogan in the Ceremony and the Games generally—the Chinese Communist Party pronounced that they would “put people first,” to provide social services and safeguard public values rather than solely focus on economic development. In other words, the “harmonious society” is ushered in as a cure for the array of problems caused by rapid growth under economic reforms. Confucius, rather than Mao or communism, now serves as the figurehead of state values and approach to governance, the source of individual morality and behavior, and the face of Chinese identity. The Chinese Communist Party is refigured as the guarantor of national stability and prosperity, rather than revolutionary

⁸⁰ “Zhang Heping: yong shijie yuyan jiang Zhongguo gushi” (“Zhang Heping: using an international language to tell China’s story”), *Sanlian shenghuo zhoukan* = *Sanlian Life Weekly*, No. 492, August 18, 2008, 70.

virtues. Promoting this new brand of Confucianism has also been part of the Party's effort, since the 1989 Democracy Movement, to quell the desire for political reforms and Western style democracy. The "harmonious society" reincarnation of Confucianism is written over the revolutionary legacy of Mao and the CCP, which from its beginnings cast Confucianism as the source of China's backwardness and themselves as the liberators from a feudal Confucian past. Furthermore, it seeks to make Western style democracy appear foreign and inadequate.

In this chapter I seek to make sense of this 21st century reincarnation of Confucianism from a historical perspective, examining how Confucius has been reassessed over the twentieth century, both in China and its "periphery" (Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore), in order to understand the sources from which this new state-Confucianism draws, and its larger social, political and economic ramifications. I will examine four modern reincarnations of Confucius, spanning the twentieth century, tracing the changing ideological messages he was made to stand for: The May Fourth period; The New Life Movement; The "Criticize Confucius/Criticize Lin Biao" movement during the Cultural Revolution; and, the Confucian Revival in the 80s and 90s. Finally, I will assess the Hu Administration's "harmonious" version of Confucianism and its limits, including both the gulf between the official call for "harmony" and actual state policies, and the ways in which the Party's anti-Confucian legacy continues to haunt efforts for its revival. By tracing what Confucius has been made to stand for, we can reach a better understanding of what is animating the battle over Confucius today, and explain both why the Hu Administration's promotion of Confucius and persistent opposition to this effort.

Confucius as Cannibal: New Culture Iconoclasm

The official revival of Confucius today is rich with irony, considering that the PRC was the product of radical intellectuals who promised to bury him and the traditional culture he represented. The Chinese Revolution at its very beginnings a century ago challenged the Confucian system, when intellectuals argued that an attachment to Confucian values was to blame for China's decline in the nineteenth century. Comparing China with Europe and Japan, they saw China as culturally and politically backward. The most important critique of Confucius came from the New Culture movement (1915-1923), led by an iconoclastic band of intellectuals who sought to replace China's Confucian culture with Western Enlightenment values of science and democracy.⁸¹ These intellectuals, among them a young Mao Zedong, denounced Confucianism for valuing age over youth, oppressing women, stifling individualism and creativity, and sustaining a cult of tradition that prevented innovation.⁸² To become a modern nation, they argued Confucian values had to be totally rejected and certain Western values embraced, as they claimed Japan had done to become a modern power.

Vera Schwarcz has dubbed this period of iconoclastic intellectual thought the "Chinese Enlightenment", symbolizing the radical call to cut away Confucius and traditionalism from Chinese culture, and similarly to the Enlightenment in Europe, promoting "science" and "democracy". New Culture intellectuals, themselves a

⁸¹ Vera Schwarz, *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

⁸² Jeffrey Wasserstrom, *China in the 21st Century: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

privileged class within the Confucian social order, bemoaned the “slavish character of the Chinese people” and sought to cure it with the “medicine of liberty”.⁸³ In real terms, this meant rejecting every social norm of Confucian society. From the pages of *New Youth* magazine, these young intellectuals spoke out against the patriarchal practices and values of arranged marriage and filial piety, promoted the young over the old, and sought out a new form of egoism and individualism. While Confucian reformers of a generation earlier advocated *ti-yong*, “Chinese learning as the goal, Western learning as the means”⁸⁴, the May Fourth generation advocated a break with the past, the rejection of Confucian culture and a commitment to critical-minded humanism.

Their iconoclastic efforts, however, were saddled with some of the old biases and privileges that these intellectuals had enjoyed as literati under the very system they were claiming to reject. Though they cast Confucianism as the embodiment of society’s ills, urging the overthrow of the established order, they failed to seriously challenge class and gender inequality. Witnessing the failure of the 1911 revolution to produce a viable republic, they blamed the pernicious culture of submissiveness, which they saw as residing with the lower classes.⁸⁵ Ironically maintaining their old self-image as the source of national morality and virtue, in their view, they believed that it was masses of lower class Chinese people who were “asleep”, mired in oppressive customs, and their job, as enlightened, educated members of the elite, was to do the waking. A similar bias was present in their endorsement of “women’s liberation”, which targeted the tradition of arranged marriage, which they argued was detrimental to the happiness of individuals,

⁸³ Wasserstrom, *China in the 21st Century: What Everyone Needs to Know*, 32.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

and to the productivity and well-being of the whole nation. And yet, as Susan Glossner has argued, the feminism of the New Culture intellectuals was from an overwhelmingly masculine perspective, reflecting desires for a new, modern masculinity rather than actually empowering women. “Because it was so important to a man’s identity as a modern, enlightened individual to make a freely chosen love-marriage, the quality of his marriage and his wife became absolutely essential to his self-image. Consequently, despite the rhetoric about women’s rights to independence and full personhood, these men were most interested in creating women who met male demands for educated, enlightened companionship.”⁸⁶ Though May Fourth intellectuals presented themselves as overturning Confucian ideals of filial duty, family relationships and marriage, they were not questioning the centrality of marriage to the individual’s self-image, and rarely did they question their own privileged male status. Such were the limitations of May Fourth iconoclasm. Their particular portrayal of Confucianism served as a straw man within their own political critique, and their supposed break with the past was not as complete as they imagined.

Their portrayal of Confucianism and tradition is shockingly captured in Lu Xun’s famous “Diary of a Madman,” published in *New Youth* in 1918. Despondent over the lack of cultural change in post-revolution China, in his preface to the story Lu Xun described the Chinese masses as “asleep”, too subservient and stuck in the past to realize they were “about to die of suffocation.” This short story describes one man who woke up to China’s bitter reality, only to realize that the values of his family and village amounted to cannibalism. Reading the tomes of China’s four thousand year history, only the madman

⁸⁶ Susan Glosser, “‘The Truths I Have Learned’: Nationalism, Family Reform, and Male Identity in China’s New Culture Movement, 1915-1923,” in *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*, ed. Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom and Susan Brownell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

could read between the lines of “benevolence, righteousness, and morality”—“ the whole volume was filled with a single phrase: EAT PEOPLE!”⁸⁷ Witnessing the many failures and shortcomings of Republican era China, “Diary of a Madman” reifies all Chinese culture into this single command. This erased the diversity and value of Chinese culture and Confucianism. But for Lu Xun’s purposes, such a stark depiction of Confucianism and tradition was necessary to make his case, that this tradition had been whitewashed and twisted into ideological tools to serve those in power.

Real change in China, Lu Xun argued, would have to begin with a total rejection of China’s “cannibalistic” past, which he equated with a Confucian system that had become ineffective and oppressive. As Lu Xun put it to his readers in “Confucius in Modern China” (1935), the Chinese leadership would have to choose whether it was “more expedient to save their own skin” by modernizing and Westernizing, or to “worship Confucius and perish.”⁸⁸ Historian Joseph R. Levenson has described intellectuals during this time as struggling to satisfy the demands of “history” (an attachment to one’s own history and culture) and of “value” (usefulness in achieving the immediate demands of China’s situation). By the second half of the nineteenth century, European imperialism and the breakdown of traditional Chinese society, the attachment to the truth and superiority of Confucianism and Chinese thought transformed from a commitment to “value”—what is universal and true—to a romantic attachment to “history”—the local and particular.⁸⁹ New Culture intellectuals saw themselves as

⁸⁷ Lu Xun, *Diary of a Madman and other stories* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 32.

⁸⁸ Lu Xun, “*Zai xiandai Zhongguo de Kongfuzi*” = “Confucius in Modern China”, trans. David Pollard, in ed. Pollard, *The Chinese Essay* (NY: Columbia UP, 2000) 121-28.

⁸⁹ Joseph R. Levenson, “*History*” and “*Value*”: *The Tensions of Intellectual Choice in Modern China*, in ed. A. F. Wright, *Studies in Chinese Thought* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1953).

severing all attachment to Confucianism and “history”, and seeking out new (Western) values that would be the most effective way to “save China” from ruin and foreign domination. Though their critique of Confucianism was flawed and confined to a small cultural elite, these iconoclastic cultural currents would produce the Chinese Communist Party in 1921.

Confucius as National Saviour: The New Life Movement

The New Life Movement was the Nationalists’ own effort to “save China” from imperialism and Communism, reconfiguring Confucianism as a mass social movement to unify and renew the nation. Inaugurated February 19, 1934 under the leadership of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975), the movement sought to “revolutionize” Chinese life through hygienic and behavioral reform and the “traditional values” of Confucianism. Though the campaign was an utter failure, the New Life Movement deserves attention as a major effort to reinvent Confucianism according to the needs of a modern, authoritarian Chinese nation-state.

The New Life Movement was conceived as a revolution against the revolution, a mass social movement to fortify the Chinese people spiritually and mobilize them against the twin threats of communism and Japanese imperialism. Rather than a resurrection of the old Confucian order, the New Life Movement was a “modern response to a modern problem,” appealing to tradition and Confucian morality in the service of essentially fascist political goals.⁹⁰ Seeing Chinese society as “degenerate,” Nationalist leader

⁹⁰ Arif Dirlik, “The Ideological Foundations of the New Life Movement: A Study in Counterrevolution,” *Journal of Asian Studies* Vol. 34, no. 4 (August, 1975).

Chiang Kai-shek declared that “there must be obedience, sacrifice, strictness, cleanliness, accuracy, diligence, secrecy... And everyone together must firmly and bravely sacrifice for the group and for the nation.”⁹¹ He optimistically conceived of the New Life

Movement as a cure-all for China’s ills:

What is the New Life Movement that I now propose? Stated simply, it is to militarize thoroughly the lives of citizens of the entire nation so that they can cultivate courage and swiftness, the endurance of suffering and a tolerance for hard work, and especially the habit and ability of unified action, so that they will at any time sacrifice for the nation.”⁹²

These goals reflected Chiang Kai-shek’s desire to emulate fascist Germany and Japan rather than simply to resurrect the Chinese past.

The Nationalists flattened the entire Confucian tradition into “traditional virtues” which only emphasized discipline and deference to authority, a “native morality” which rang hollow. Chiang’s fascist vision of society was meant to be achieved through adopting the Confucian principles of social usage (*li*), and the associated virtues of “righteousness” (*yi*), “integrity” (*lien*), and “sense of shame” (*chi*).⁹³ The most important was *li*, meaning, ceremonial, or more broadly, proper behavior.⁹⁴ “They pulled from Confucianism, on an ad-hoc basis,” writes historian Mary Wright in her 1955 critique, “whatever seemed likely to promote internal order. Reasonably enough, their chief emphasis... was on the principles of social usage (*li*) and the associated virtues of *yi*, *lien* and *chi*... In view of the KMT ideologists, Confucianism was the most effective and

⁹¹ Iwai Eiichi, “Ranisha ni kansuru chosa” = “An investigation of the Blue Shirts”, 37-8, in Lloyd E. Eastman, “Fascism in Kuomintang China: The Blue Shirts,” *The China Quarterly* 49 (1972): 31, doi:10.1017/S0305741000036481.

⁹² Chiang Kai-shek, *Chiang tsung-t’ung ssu-hsiang yen-lun chi = A Collection of President Chiang’s Thoughts and Speeches*, 12.111, in Eastman, “Fascism in Kuomintang China: The Blue Shirts,” 31.

⁹³ Chiang Kai-shek, “Essentials of the New Life Movement,” (Nanchang, September, 1934), http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup/chiang_kaishek_new_life.pdf.

⁹⁴ Dirlik, “The Ideological Foundations of the New Life Movement,” 966.

cheapest means ever devised by man for this purpose.”⁹⁵ But to the Nationalists, even the “native morality” of “*li, yi, lien, chi*” was flexible, and subordinate to the goals creating national unification and enforcing the authority of the state.⁹⁶ Rather than the values of Confucianism, its “Chineseness” was emphasized in the New Life Movement. This reinvention put a native, “traditional” face on what at its core, was a fully modern agenda.

Confucius as Internal Enemy: Mao and Cultural Revolution

Chinese Communists under Mao Zedong (1893-1976) portrayed Confucius as the hidden internal enemy, legitimating permanent revolution. Cast by New Culture intellectuals and Chiang Kai-shek alike as the embodiment of Chinese traditional culture, Maoists portrayed Confucius as the symbol of anti-revolutionary change, their natural enemy in their mission to enact continuous revolution and violent struggle to create a socialist utopia. Mao urged the Chinese to critically examine China’s history, to “make a summing-up from Confucius down to Sun Yat-sen and inherit this precious legacy,” but had few kind words for Confucius. The perceived strict hierarchical nature of Confucianism was targeted first and foremost. The three Confucian relationships of deference—of the subject to the state, of wife to husband, and child to parent—were portrayed as oppressive, the remnants of China’s feudal past. In 1940, Mao wrote:

Those who worship Confucius and advocate reading the classics of Confucianism stand for the old ethics, old rites and old thoughts against the new culture and new thought. . . . As imperialist culture and semi-feudal culture serve imperialism and the feudal class, they should be

⁹⁵ Mary C. Wright, “From Revolution to Restoration: The Transformation of Kuomintang Ideology,” *Far Eastern Quarterly* Vol. 14, No.4 (August, 1955), 515-524.

⁹⁶ Dirlik, “The Ideological Foundations of the New Life Movement,” 965.

eliminated... Compared to Confucius's classics, socialism is much better.⁹⁷

Clearly Mao would allow for no ideological ambiguity, or try to reconcile China's traditional culture with modernity as the Nationalists had attempted. He also erased the more flexible aspects of Confucianism, such as that the Confucian system allowed for meritocratic social mobilization within the hierarchy, and established relationships not only of submission, but of reciprocity, in which each actor had responsibility according to their roles to which they were held accountable.

Rather than Confucius, Mao identified himself with Qin Shihuangdi, the first emperor to unify China in 221 B.C. Influenced by the anti-Confucian thinker Han Fei Zi, the Emperor Qin despised Confucian literati, who stressed tolerance and rule by morality, and oversaw the execution of intellectuals and mass book burnings.⁹⁸ Emperor Qin, Mao told his followers in 1958,

buried only 460 Confucian scholars alive. We buried 46,000 Confucian scholars... We have outdone Emperor Qin Shihuang more than a hundredfold... People always condemn Emperor Qin Shihuang for burning books and burying alive Confucian scholars, and list these as his great crimes. I think, however, he killed too few Confucians... Those Confucian scholars were indeed counter-revolutionaries.⁹⁹

Like the first emperor, who was considered a brutal tyrant in most Confucian accounts of history, Mao saw himself as similarly unifying a fractured country and overthrowing the old social order, with Confucius representing the biggest villain of antiquity.

⁹⁷ Mao Zedong, "On New Democratism," 1940.

⁹⁸ Daniel Bell, *China's New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 21.

⁹⁹ Fu Zhengyuan, *China's Legalists: The Earliest Totalitarians and Their Art of Ruling* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1996).

These efforts accelerated during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), when Communist propagandists identified “Lauding and Glorifying Confucius’s Thought” with “Maliciously Attacking Mao Zedong Thought” and “Maliciously Attacking Proletarian Dictatorship.”¹⁰⁰ During this time, Mao mobilized the youth to “Smash the Four Olds”—old customs, culture, habits, and ideas. The Confucian tradition, embodying the Old, was made synonymous with bourgeois and imperialist influence, and all the corruption of the pre-Revolution society.¹⁰¹ The Party repudiated the tenets of Confucianism and prompted the destruction of countless Confucian temples, artifacts and sacred texts, expressing their contempt for the old system and seeking to completely eradicate the sage’s legacy.

In 1971, the airplane of Mao’s former protégé Lin Biao was apparently shot down while he was reportedly attempting escape to the Soviet Union. Formerly Mao’s handpicked successor, Lin was rumored to be leading a coup against him. Following his death, a mass propaganda campaign, “Criticize Lin Biao/Criticize Confucius” began, based on the allegation that Lin was an admirer of Confucius. Every aspect of Confucian thought was attacked: Confucius’s preoccupation with a golden age in the past rather than the future, his male chauvinism, his lauding of education and intellectuals, his insistence on universal ethics as opposed to class-based ones, and the supposed attractiveness of his ideas to China’s capitalist sympathizers and counter-revolutionaries, especially Chiang Kai-shek who now presided over the Republic of China in Taiwan.¹⁰² This connection of

¹⁰⁰ Michael Nyland and Thomas Wilson, *Lives of Confucius* (New York: Random House, 2010), 205.

¹⁰¹ Tony Zhang and Barry Schwartz, “Confucius and the Cultural Revolution: A Study in Collective Memory,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, Vol. 11, No. 2. (1997): 198.

¹⁰² Tony Zhang and Barry Schwartz, “Confucius and the Cultural Revolution: A Study in Collective Memory,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, Vol. 11, No. 2. (1997): 205.

Lin Biao to Confucius asserted that Mao's former heir apparent had become an enemy of the Revolution, like Confucius, and intended to restore capitalism to China. "Although Confucius is dead," read a typical newspaper story, "his corpse continues to emit its stench even today. Its poison is deep and its influence extensive."¹⁰³ Confucius cast as the hidden internal enemy legitimated permanent revolution.

Confucius as Capitalist Authoritarian: The Confucian Revival and the Asian Economic Miracle

While Communists in the PRC made Confucius into an anti-revolutionary villain, Singaporean leader Lee Kuan Yew (b.1923) led the effort to make Confucius into a mascot of his own project to modernize Singapore. Ironically, both versions saw Confucianism is compatible with capitalism and social conservatism, but in Singapore, such values undergirded Lee Kuan Yew's efforts, beginning in the 1970s, to enforce political and social stability, industrialize Singapore, and conjoin it with the global capitalist economy. In this small East Asian state Lee invented and realized so-called "capitalism with Asian values", authoritarian state capitalism which promoted a new version of Confucianism as the basis of national values.

Since the late 1970s, the Singaporean government had sought to introduce "Asian values into the school curriculum as a means of countering the Western 'cultural onslaught' on the young."¹⁰⁴ In an interview from the late 1980s, Lee explained the

¹⁰³ Benjamin A. Shobert, "Confucius reprises role as political pawn," *Asia Times Online*, August 9, 2011, <http://atimes.com/atimes/China/MH09Ad01.html>.

¹⁰⁴ John Wong and Aline Wong, "Confucian Values as a Social Framework for Singapore's Economic Development," in *Conference on Confucianism and Economic Development in East Asia* (Taipei: Chung-Hua Institution for Economic Research, 1989), 521.

danger of “Westernization” which prompted the promotion of his endorsement of “Asian values” and the new Confucianism:

I think we will face a serious problem because of the constant assault on our core values, like attitudes between men and women, husband and wife, father and children, attitudes between citizens and the government. Singaporeans watch so much of Western, especially American television, that they may begin to feel that is the norm, that is the standard. And we may move into that standard unconsciously.¹⁰⁵

Significantly, Lee identified these trends not as a product of capitalism, but of “Western” culture. Increasing disorder in gender and familial relations and shifts in political relationships were seen not as the locally generated effects of Singapore’s new economic policies, but of a foreign, “Western” contamination. According to Lee, these social changes are not the result of massive state efforts to industrialize and liberalize the Singaporean economy, but the result of too much Western TV. Not only are national values being defined here, but the onus of change is being placed on the citizen, rather than the state, to uphold the national cultural agenda.

Confucianism was chosen as the basis of efforts to stem such cultural “degeneration”. In 1982, Singapore introduced a new “moral education” curriculum into the schools, created in consultation with Harvard Confucian scholar Tu Weiming, and other “New Confucian” academics mostly teaching in the United States. The government also promoted the study of Confucianism at the Institute of East Asian Philosophies, established in 1983 “to promote and reinterpret Confucianism.”¹⁰⁶ A network of scholars, conferences and publications sprang up in Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, producing numerous articles and events which focused especially on the application of

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 519.

¹⁰⁶ Arif Dirlik, “Confucius in the Borderlands: Global Capitalism and the Reinvention of Confucianism.” *Boundary 2*, 22 (3) (1995): 240.

Confucianism to modern society—that is, a version of Confucianism that would enable authoritarian politics and capitalism.

In its new formulation, Confucianism was depicted as having the power to mitigate the perceived ills of Western culture, and create a more unified, disciplined workforce and citizenry. This idea was largely derived from Herman Kahn’s influential *World Economic Development: 1979 and Beyond* (1979). In the book, he praised Taiwan and South Korea for their “heroic” industrial and technological development, exhibiting “the special relationship between the neo-Confucian cultures and the rapid emergence of a super-industrial world economy.” This was marked by egalitarian income distribution, high morale, and competent management.¹⁰⁷ The “Confucian ethic” was given credit for the accomplishments: “the creation of dedicated, motivated, responsible, and educated individuals and the enhanced sense of commitment, organizational identity, and loyalty, to various institutions [be it the “family, the business firm or a bureau in the government”].¹⁰⁸ Kahn deemed this “Confucian ethic” superior to the “Protestant ethic” that Max Weber had argued was extremely useful in promoting the rise of modernity and industrialization in the West.¹⁰⁹ In the eyes of Kahn and other Asian scholars in American academia, Confucianism had promoted: a respect for education and hard work; valuing the group over the individual; and the development of “harmonious” relations in organizations, due to the Confucian sense of hierarchy and reciprocity.¹¹⁰ What they did not acknowledge, however, was America’s own role in enabling Asia’s so-called

¹⁰⁷ Herman Kahn, *World Economic Development: 1979 and Beyond* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1979), 329.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹¹⁰ Dirlik, “Confucius in the Borderlands,” 247.

“economic miracle”. The US and West kept markets open to Taiwan, South Korea and Japan as part of a grand strategy during the Cold War, to promote rapid economic development and make these countries strong allies against communism. Nevertheless, during the 1970s and 1980s this new Confucianism was portrayed as making capitalism function even more effectively than in the West, by holding the promise to create self-regulating workers in a neoliberal society. For East Asian states seeking rapid development and entry into the global capitalist economy, this tool of governmentality proved extremely attractive.

Harvard “New Confucian” Tu Weiming was one of the most influential scholars promoting the new Confucianism in Singapore and the PRC. Tu viewed Confucianism as an “ethico-spiritual” system of values,¹¹¹ but he also saw “the dark side” of Confucianism, warning of the combination of “Stalinistic totalitarianism with Confucian authoritarianism.” He advocated a critical reception of Confucianism, to recapture its original intent and achieve a “fruitful interaction, fusion, between Confucian thought and liberal democracy.”¹¹² Distancing himself from how it was practiced in imperial history, he sought to find the universal values in Confucianism that can help us “learn how to be human.”

Tu also sought to redefine Chinese identity by promoting this newly articulated Confucianism as the basis of “cultural China”—a broadly defined community existing beyond the confines of the nation-state. Tu represented

¹¹¹ Dirlik, “Confucius in the Borderlands,” 256.

¹¹² Bill Moyers, *Tu Wei-Ming: A World of Ideas—July 15, 1990*, Interview with Tu Wei Ming (1990; PBS), Video. <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/archives/ming.html>.

“cultural China” in three symbolic universes: the first is mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore; the second is made up of overseas Chinese, *huaqiao*, the Chinese diaspora; the third consists of individuals trying to understand China from the outside, such as journalists, academics, and economists.¹¹³ The 1980s and 1990s represented a historic shift in the flow of culture in “cultural China”, Tu argued, writing that the center—the PRC—having isolated itself during the last decades no longer has the “ability, insight, or legitimate authority to dictate the agenda for cultural China.”¹¹⁴ Rather the periphery—Chinese intellectuals in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Southeast Asia—would come to set the economic and cultural agenda for the center.

Tu Weiming’s thesis was later proved correct, when China’s paramount leader Deng Xiaoping held up Singapore as a model for China to emulate, admiring its mix of economic liberalization and authoritarianism; along with it the Singapore model of “new Confucianism” was simultaneously introduced into the PRC. In 1988-1989, looking to the experiences of Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, and to some degree Meiji Japan, “reformist” intellectuals associated with Premier Zhao Ziyang (1919-2005) promoted the theory of “New Authoritarianism”, an idea that had no basis in Marx or communism. The lesson they took was that “the key to economic success in the modern world is to combine political dictatorship with a capitalist market economy.”¹¹⁵ The theory stated that as opposed to the Western model, modernization in China would have to come in two stages, with economic reform and modernization preceding political democratization;

¹¹³ Tu Wei Ming, *The Living Tree: Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 13.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹¹⁵ Maurice Meisner, *The Deng Xiaoping Era* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996)

the state would ensure the conditions for sustained economic growth, preventing frequent social and political upheaval through the strong arm of the authoritarian state.

In the wake of the suppression of the 1989 Democracy Movement, fear of such upheavals, and even of civil war and revived warlordism, were exacerbated, making “New Authoritarianism” even more popular amongst a broad range of Chinese political thinkers and economists. Even exiled intellectuals and students saw it as a viable alternative to the immediate implementation of liberal democracy.¹¹⁶ Though his efforts for reform were stalled for several years following the events of 1989 by conservative Leftists, Deng Xiaoping again pressed further for emulating the Singaporean model. On a trip there in 1992, he remarked, “Singapore's social order is rather good. Its leaders exercise strict management. We should learn from their experience, and we should do a better job than they do.”¹¹⁷ Deng’s admiration for Singapore’s stable social order and its leadership’s “strict management” signaled the official turn towards “New Authoritarianism”.

Along with the Singaporean model of capitalist authoritarianism, “new Confucianism” was introduced to the PRC. In Singapore, it had served to invoke moral solidarity, legitimize the state’s own power and encourage a “Confucian ethic” that served the neo-liberal economy. Most importantly for the Chinese leadership, it depoliticized the problems of contemporary Chinese society. The 1989 Democracy Movement argued for rapid political reform as a resolution to the problems created by a decade of economic reforms; “new Confucianism” disavowed this political solution on

¹¹⁶ Barry Sautman, “Sirens of the Strongman: Neo-Authoritarianism in Recent Chinese Political Theory,” *The China Quarterly* 129 (March, 1992): 72.

¹¹⁷ Nicholas Kristof, “THE WORLD; China Sees Singapore as a Model for Progress,” *The New York Times*, August 9, 1992, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/08/09/weekinreview/the-world-china-sees-singapore-as-a-model-for-progress.html>.

cultural grounds. If there were problems of corruption, social instability, lack of social cohesion towards state goals, “new Confucianism” suggested that these were the influence of “Westernization,” requiring state directed social control rather than bottom up political reform. This coincided with the larger effort in response to the 1989 Democracy Movement to convince the Chinese citizenry that China possessed a unique history and culture which required slow, state directed political reform, and that adopting liberal “Western-style” democracy would only end in disaster. In pitting Confucius and “Asian values” against liberal democracy and political reform, “new Confucianism” put a Chinese face on Deng Xiaoping’s efforts to promote capitalist authoritarianism.

Hu Jintao’s Harmonious society

In 2005, President Hu Jintao incorporated the “new Confucianism” into state discourse as never before in the Party’s history, making the Confucian idea of “harmonious society” the ubiquitous slogan describing the administration’s world view and political goals. Hu first put forward this concept in a speech at the Central Party School in February 2005. He said that the socialist harmonious society “should feature democracy, the rule of law, equity, justice, sincerity, amity and vitality,” which would “give full scope to people's talent and creativity, enable all the people to share the social wealth brought by reform and development, and forge an ever closer relationship between the people and government.” Such goals sprang from recognition of the “problems and contradictions,” the rise of “negative and corruptive phenomena and more

rampant crimes” as China transitioned from a planned economy to a market economy.¹¹⁸

Facing the “huge gaps in income, increasingly serious problems facing rural areas, farmers and agriculture, the drainage of farmland, heavy pressure in the workplace and an incomplete social security system”¹¹⁹ created by economic liberalization, “building a harmonious society” signalled that now the government would “put people first”—rather than putting gross national product first.

In essence, Hu suggested that China didn’t need democracy or political reform, because China could have “harmony.” Drawing upon the “new Confucianism” that had emerged under Lee Kuan Yew, the “harmonious society” was presented as the authentically Chinese way to solve the problems of capitalism, compared to “foreign”, liberal democracy. While the Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin administrations had represented themselves as agents of economic development, “harmonious society” policies sought to transform the government into a provider of public services.¹²⁰ This would include more social participation, fewer special interest groups and state-owned enterprises, and more support for NGOs. But Chinese political analysts have criticized the policy, seeing it more as rhetoric than actual policy change. In 2010, political analyst Zhao Litao offered one such critique, writing that “Hu needed ‘pro-people’ policies to rally public support to consolidate his power in the first term. The purpose of the Hu-Wen new deal was to legitimize their leadership. The implementation was a secondary issue in

¹¹⁸ “Building Harmonious Society Crucial for China's Progress,” *Xinhua*, June 27, 2005, http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200506/27/eng20050627_192495.html.

¹¹⁹ “Harmonious Society,” *China Daily*, Sept. 29, 2007, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90002/92169/92211/6274603.html>.

¹²⁰ Zhao Litao and Lim Tin Seng, *China's New Social Policy: Initiatives for a Harmonious Society* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co., 2010), 15.

this regard. To a large extent, the system remains in favor of GDP growth.”¹²¹ The “harmonious society” promise to prioritize populist goals is extremely vulnerable to such critiques, which point out the gap between lofty utopian rhetoric and the political reality.

While the “harmonious society” rhetoric allowed the Hu administration to articulate the many services it would supposedly be providing for Chinese society, it more silently signalled how society would have to bend to the will of the state. Rather than addressing the demands for political reform and tensions created by social inequalities, “harmony” has meant political oppression and the beefing up of the security apparatus during the past decade. The Olympic Games spurred increasingly sophisticated media and internet censorship under the banner of “creating a harmonious society” forcing Chinese “netizens” to search for other means of political expression. In response, they developed a political codeword to escape censorship, such as “river crab” (*he xie*)—a pun for “harmonious society”. In folk language the crab refers to people who are bullies and wield violent power, making the “river crab” a cutting satirical symbol of the Communist Party.¹²² The internet has been an important site of coded political resistance to state authoritarianism, but does not represent larger social trends—rebellious “netizens” are still a tiny minority. While some Westerners had hoped that the Olympic Games would lead to increased freedoms or even political change in China, as had happened in the wake of the South Korean games of 1988, the opposite seemed to be the case.

¹²¹ Ibid., 4.

¹²² Xiao Qing, “Under the Internet Police’s Radar,” *China Digital Times*, August 28, 2008, <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2007/08/under-the-internet-polices-radar/>.

Even more threatening to the state efforts to remake Confucius to their own ends was a backlash from within the Chinese Communist Party. In January, 2011, a massive bronze statue of Confucius appeared in front of the newly renovated National Museum of China on Tiananmen Square, positioned directly across from Mao's mausoleum. The statue's appearance sparked fervent speculation by Chinese scholars, who saw it as a major step by the Chinese Communist Party towards officially enshrining Confucius and overturning the iconoclasm of Mao Zedong, whose iconic portrait hung just across the Square.¹²³ Could it be, as philosophy Professor Daniel Bell at Tsinghua University has suggested, that CCP will soon stand for the Chinese Confucian Party?

Apparently not. Early in the morning of April 21, 2011, the statue mysteriously disappeared from Tiananmen Square and moved into a less visible courtyard, without any public explanation from the National Museum. A storm of speculation erupted on the Chinese blogosphere. One anonymous commentator on sina.cn's microblog bemoaned the statue's disappearance, writing, "The Analects of Confucius are in fact more like demands for morality from the rulers, so to move away his statue represents the bankruptcy of government morality. It just wastes ordinary people's money."¹²⁴ Comments on the website maoflag.net, a popular forum for neo-Maoists, celebrated the statue's removal, declaring that "the statue of the slave-owning sorcerer Confucius has been driven from Tiananmen Square!"¹²⁵ In the website's lead article, "Confucius, All the Best!", author Feng Wu wrote that a statue celebrating the masses—the artists, scientists,

¹²³ Andrew Jacobs, "Confucius Statue Vanishes Near Tiananmen Square," *New York Times*, April 22, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/23/world/asia/23confucius.html>.

¹²⁴ "Confucius Statue Move Prompts Online Stir," *AFP*, April 21, 2011, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hEH3mlPCfn8BXcPjyju1Bs6oImyQ?docId=CNG.27999a04bc06e05036cb9b41f305175d.351>.

¹²⁵ Sally Huang, "Controversial Confucius Statue Vanishes from Tiananmen Square," *Reuters*, April 22, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/04/22/us-china-confucius-idUSTRE73L0Y420110422>.

etc.—of China’s past dynasties was more appropriate, and that Confucius should “stay in the temple.”¹²⁶ The Central Party School, the influential training institute for future leaders of the CCP, had also opposed the statue’s placement and had been quietly pushing for its removal.¹²⁷

This battle over history demonstrates that Confucius is still a site of active struggle, even within the Chinese Communist Party itself. The most symbolic national space in China, Tiananmen Square is home to Mao Zedong’s Mausoleum, the Monument to the People’s Heroes, the Great Hall of the People—this is where the Revolution, the foundational ideas of the People’s Republic of China, are enshrined. Reified within this space, brought face to face with Mao himself, we cannot only see Confucius in his present day reincarnation as symbol of a harmonious, unified China. Here, he is stepping into revolutionary space, where for most of PRC history, he had stood as symbol of the “Old”, of conservatism and decay, capitalism and imperialism, embodying everything which the revolution would overturn. Despite the massive efforts by the Hu Jintao administration to promote “harmonious society” policy and rhetoric, they have not resolved the contradictions between China’s revolutionary past, and “harmonious” vision of the future. The effort to put away Mao and revolution and to redefine the national agenda as pursuing a “harmonious society” are still tenuous, facing ambivalence from the public and part of the CCP. Confucius triumphed in the Olympic Ceremony, but in the highly charged national space of Tiananmen Square, Mao Zedong and China’s revolutionary past still dominates.

¹²⁶ Wu Feng Jiu Tian, “Kong Fuzi, yilu zou hao!!” = “Confucius, all the best!!” *Mao Flag*, April 21, 2011, <http://www.maoflag.net/?action-viewthread-tid-1543610>.

¹²⁷ Andrew Jacobs, “Confucius Statue Vanishes Near Times Square,” *New York Times*, April 22, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/23/world/asia/23confucius.html>.

The Future of Confucius in the PRC

Considering the dramatic political swings of recent Chinese history, it is not surprising that Confucius was made to stand at opposite ends, sometimes as a villain, sometimes as a hero of efforts to modernize China. May Fourth iconoclastic intellectuals made Confucius embody everything that they saw as wrong with the old order, and saw themselves as overthrowing in the name of liberty, science and democracy. Later, the Kuomintang recast Confucianism as the source of national morality, unity and order, in service of their fascist agenda. Decades after the establishment of the PRC, Confucius's image was revived again as symbolizing the internal enemy, corrupting Chinese from beyond the grave. Meanwhile in China's periphery, Confucius was recast as "Asian values" in support of social stability during economic reform, a strategy that would be imported into the PRC under the guise of Hu Jintao's "harmonious society" policies.

Even as the Chinese Hu Jintao administration asserted their own version of Confucianism, they simultaneously opened the floodgates for a multitude of actors to engage with Confucius on their own terms. In the wake of economic liberalization and the abandonment of communitarian ways of life, many individuals have looked to Confucian ethics to help them find happiness in an increasingly competitive and materialistic society.¹²⁸ Perhaps the most popular reincarnation of Confucius has been Beijing Normal University professor Yu Dan's "self help" interpretation of the *Analects*, which became a national sensation. In her television program and book, she told her audience Confucius could help them "attain spiritual happiness, adjust our daily routines

¹²⁸ Sheila Melvin, "Modern Gloss on China's Golden Age," *New York Times*, September 3, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/03/arts/03stud.html?fta=y>.

and find our place in modern life.”¹²⁹ Other so-called “left Confucians” attempt to reconcile socialism with the Confucian tradition, and urge the government to tolerate political diversity, care for the disadvantaged and improve economic equality, even calling to reinstate official examinations and other political forms from the imperial past.¹³⁰

At the beginning of this chapter, I quoted Professor Zhang Yiwu of Peking University, who said that facing the problems of modern society, “it’s natural for people to turn to the philosophy of Confucius, whose ideas about harmony more than 2,000 years ago can be solutions to many of today’s problems.”¹³¹ But as I have shown in this chapter, people and states have never really turned away from Confucius, but have constantly reengaged him from their own historical position, and fit him into their own political, moral landscape. The search for Confucius has been the search for something unchanging, but this search has led to many different places. The Olympic Ceremony represents one such attempt to define the unchanging “Chinese spirit”, putting Confucius and their own authoritarian brand of Confucian “harmony” center stage; despite their efforts, Confucius remains a site of struggle over national values, even within the Communist Party itself.

¹²⁹ Daniel Bell, “Confucianism—Revival,” *Berkshire Encyclopedia of China: Modern and Historic Views of the World’s Newest and Oldest Global Power 2* (Great Barrington, MA: Berkshire Publishing, 2009), 482-492.

¹³⁰ Daniel Bell, *China’s New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹³¹ “Confucius back in style in modern China,” *China Daily*, Aug 9, 2008, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90782/90873/6470242.html>.

Conclusion

In the second half of the ceremony, China's constructed imperial past is symbolically conjoined with modernity, a dream of the future. Ornate set pieces and elaborate costumes give way to a class of ordinary school children, who make a landscape painting in a classroom; an astronaut flies through the air, representing China's 2003 space mission; a collage of smiling faces from around the world pops up on stage; pop singers from Europe and China sing together; and finally, suspended dancers run and leap around a giant spinning globe. Here, the promise of education, technology, and peaceful integration in the world community are represented. The ceremony suggests that these achievements will be made not by becoming more like the West, but by becoming more Chinese. As China enjoys its so-called "coming out party" at the Beijing Olympics, it is also rediscovering what director Zhang Yimou called "the heart of the Chinese people"—a heart that is supposedly rooted in the imperial past.

But as this thesis has shown, the symbols of the imperial past on view in the Opening Ceremony are actually a product of recent history. They are not ancient, they are not a special product of a unique culture, they do not represent eternal unchanging qualities; rather, they represent a recent history of interaction and reimagining of Chinese identity. China's history of submission under European imperialism, Revolution, and communism is auspiciously absent from the Ceremony, but this experience is present in the symbols themselves. Put into a historical context, these symbols speak not to China's rediscovery of the ancient past, but to the continued weight of the recent past in determining Chinese identity and values.

This thesis has taken the symbols of the imperial past out of the Ceremony, and pulled them into a modern global historical context. First, this has revealed that far from being the product of China alone, these symbols were a coproduction of China and the West, appearing in the interactions between the two as one tried to define themselves' against the other during periods of tense interactions. Transnationally produced symbols were domesticated in China, and brought back out in the Ceremony for the world to recognize again.

Second, the symbols express political positions of the Chinese leadership in cultural terms. The symbols I have examined here portray China as peaceful and respectful of the sovereignty of other nations; as a technological superpower, contributing to world civilization; and as a “harmonious society”, tempering the ills of capitalism with a culture of civility and stability. Human rights, democracy, and market capitalism can now be rejected on *cultural* grounds, as both foreign and unnecessary. Beneath the “culture and history” in the Opening Ceremony are the much less attractive political positions of the state: authoritarianism, a desire for power and world status, and for a greater ability to exercise power abroad. Dressing political messages up in cultural garb transforms them from issues of morality and politics into more incontrovertible statements of identity, rendering argument moot. In other words, political objectives are made to resemble an age-old “Chinese spirit” to be revived today.

Third, these symbols express the desire of the state for global power and status, rather than a cultural revival of any kind. Rather than representing the values or history of the past, these symbols have been closely tied with efforts to define China and the West in unequal terms. Zheng He, the four great inventions and Confucius were all used at one

time in narratives which saw China as in decline, experiencing initial success but stuck in the past, while the superior Europeans developed modern technology, philosophy and global empires. Revived in the context of China's rise in 2008, these symbols bring that narrative of decline back out and add a chapter—of China's return to global superpower status.

This thesis sought to locate those principles in a detailed historical account of three of the Opening Ceremony's most prominent symbols. In the first chapter, I showed how Zheng He and his voyages to the Indian Ocean were made into a symbol of China's Peaceful Rise. Though condemned in Confucian historiography as a waste of lives and resources, Zheng He was revived at the beginning of the twentieth century as a patriotic symbol of Chinese sea power. It was British historian of science Joseph Needham, however, who popularized Zheng He from the 1960s as a symbol of Chinese culture, by comparing the peaceful Chinese journeys to the violent, colonialist European explorers of the later 15th century. The Chinese government picked up on this version of Zheng He, fashioning him into a symbol of their peaceful intentions as a rising power compared to the imperialist West. However, the comparison goes beyond the behaviour of East and West—Zheng He, with his fleet of massive treasure ships manned by a crew of 27,000, also provides an image of a China that bigger, stronger, and more technologically advanced than the West. It is this aspect, rather than the short-lived history of the Ming voyages, that is also celebrated in the Olympic Ceremony.

In the second chapter, I showed how the four great inventions became a symbol of the unequal status between Europe and China. Though first conceived as three great

inventions in Renaissance Europe, during the colonial age, they were made to symbolize China's past success, but eventual failure to develop modern science, compared to the more innovative, enlightened Europeans. It was not until the twentieth century, when China was redefining itself as a modern nation-state, that the "four great inventions" were domesticated as "*si da faming*", a symbol which pointed to the potential of the nation to reclaim lost power and status. More than the values of creativity, education or ingenuity, the four great inventions represent a Chinese desire for global influence.

In the third chapter, I showed how Confucius has been reinvented repeatedly in modern Chinese history, representing an unchanging Chinese core to be conjoined with, or rejected in favor of, modern, "Western" culture and technology. In conflating Confucius with Chinese culture, however, political actors successfully obscured the limits of their own political agendas. New Culture intellectuals rejected "Confucius" and "tradition" while failing to address actual aspects of the Confucian system, such as gender and class inequality; more extreme, Cultural Revolution Maoists fashioned Confucius into a poisonous internal enemy to legitimize ongoing revolution. Though Chiang Kai-shek's efforts to remake Confucianism as a fascist social movement in his New Life Movement were a failure, the "new Confucianism" developed in China's periphery bears an eerie resemblance. Portrayed as a work ethic that would mitigate the ills of capitalism, Confucius in this new guise has been adapted by the PRC leadership under the banner of "building a Harmonious Society". This version of Confucius, however, merely puts a veneer of tradition, culture, and "Chineseness" on authoritarianism.

Mao's words, "make the past serve the present, and make foreign things serve China" truly sum up how the Chinese Communist Party sought to use these symbols from China's imperial past in the Beijing Olympic Opening Ceremony. However, the quote was originally followed by a third line, deliberately forgotten during the Cultural Revolution: "and let a hundred flowers bloom, to weed through the old to bring forth the new."¹³² This third line gives a fuller picture of how history is constructed in China today. The Chinese Communist Party presented a teleological history at the Opening Ceremony that was blind to contingencies, but they do not control the meaning of the past. Rather, they are opening up the past in unforeseen ways as a site of symbolic meaning about China for people to fight over. The Four Great Inventions and Confucius faced critics from within the Party itself, who very publicly disagreed with the values that these symbols were made to represent. Historians have emerged to challenge the version of events presented by the state, questioning the official interpretations of Confucius, or the true nature of Zheng He's voyages; they point to the reality that these symbols are not so much concerned with understanding the past as promoting a contemporary political agenda. Most of all, the history behind these symbols that I have traced in this thesis shows the unpredictable and ever-changing meaning of the past. Faced with new crises and situation, actors from everywhere around the world get involved, moving the meaning of the past in random and unpredictable ways. One thing is certain—whatever meaning it is imbued with, the Olympic Opening Ceremony has elevated China's imperial past to one of the most important symbolic sites in which the Party-state, the Chinese people, and the whole world will contest China's modern fate.

¹³² Deng Xiaoping, "Things Must Be Put in Order in All Fields," Remarks at a forum on work in rural areas, September 27 and October 4, 1975, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/dengxp/vol2/text/b1090.html>.

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Appendix



The Bird's Nest Stadium at the beginning of the Opening Ceremony.



Harmony—*He*—is spelled out during the “invention of printing” segment.



Performers make the silhouette of a Zheng He's ship, around the “scroll of history”.



Confucian scholars chant a greeting.



Ming Dynasty sailors hold oars painted with images of Zheng He's treasure ships.



“Harmony” in printing blocks, with 3,000 Confucian scholars.