

Beijing Olympic Games opening ceremony blacks out most of twentieth century

John Chan
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Last Friday's opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics was a \$US100 million public relations exercise by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to refashion its image as a pro-business regime that has long repudiated its claims to a "socialist" or "revolutionary" tradition.

Before a 90,000-strong audience in the new "Bird's Nest" stadium, much of China's 5,000-year history was displayed on an epic scale, from the earliest legends to the modern age. The extravaganza of light, colour and spectacle, including a massive fireworks display, involved some 20,000 performers. The entire lavish affair was aimed at showcasing China's ancient culture, promoting national pride and demonstrating the country's rising economic power.

Through the device of a giant scroll of history, China's classical age of calligraphy, art and its inventions of paper, printing, gunpowder and the compass were presented in considerable detail. But then, inexplicably, the show suddenly jumped forward in time to the last couple of decades, with the advent of Chinese astronauts and bullet trains. Entirely excluded were the most critical events of the twentieth century: the First, Second and Third Chinese Revolutions of 1911, 1925-27 and 1949, along with the ensuing tumultuous decades of Mao's rule.

More than 80 world leaders, including US President George Bush—the largest number for any Olympics—were welcomed to the opening ceremony as the most important guests to witness the display of Chinese history and prowess. Any mention of the 1949 revolution, Mao Zedong or socialism would have been a major embarrassment for Beijing, which is pitching for a place for China among the major capitalist powers.

For decades, the CCP maintained the fiction that its police-state regime in some way represented socialism, as a means of suppressing social tensions throughout the country's multi-millioned masses. Now, however, even the very limited reforms that followed the 1949 revolution have been abolished. Over the past two decades, the regime has transformed China into the world's largest sweatshop, with an immense social chasm between the wealthy few and the hundreds of millions of workers and rural poor struggling to survive on a few dollars or less a day.

According to *Forbes*, the total fortune of China's 400 richest people was \$288 billion in 2007, more than double the \$116 billion in 2006. A staggering \$43 billion has been spent on the Olympics, essentially to enable the new capitalist elite to celebrate its success and show off to the world. At the same time, before the

Games opened, the authorities drove millions of migrant workers and urban poor out of Beijing. Hundreds of thousands of police and troops have been deployed and 300,000 surveillance cameras installed to ensure that no protests tarnish the carefully packaged image that Beijing wants to present.

For many watching the opening extravaganza, it may have appeared as the complete negation of the perspective of Maoism. In fact, it was the logical end product of the regime that issued from the 1949 revolution, which was not socialist or communist. It was based on the peasantry, not the working class. The party's abandonment of international socialism can be traced to Stalin's policy of subordinating the CCP to the bourgeois Kuomintang in the Second Chinese Revolution of 1925-27, which allowed Chiang Kai-shek to crush the mass movement.

Having severed any connection to the working class, the Communist Party ordered its peasant armies in 1949 to suppress any activity by workers when they entered the major cities. The military "liberation" imposed from the top quickly evolved into a police-state apparatus, aimed firstly at protecting the private property of the bourgeoisie and then the privileged bureaucracy of the new regime. Millions of people were purged, imprisoned or executed, and many more perished in Mao's economic disasters.

The nationalisation of industry and collectivisation of agriculture carried out in the 1950s was Mao's response to the economic chaos produced by the Korean War. The CCP created an autarkic economy on the basis of Stalin's nationalist formula of "building socialism in one country", blended with Mao's own peasant radicalism. The resulting economic collapses and massive famines ultimately created the conditions for the openly pro-market elements within the regime to predominate.

Mao's fundamental class orientation was graphically shown in the "Cultural Revolution" of 1966, in which he declared war on everything associated with modern industrial society: the working class, science, art and education. The resulting economic breakdown and political upheaval required the intervention of the military to suppress discontent. By 1971, amid tensions with the Soviet Union and a continuing economic crisis, Mao was driven to a rapprochement with the US under the Nixon administration.

That historic moment was certainly not forgotten last week. Just before the opening ceremony, President Bush, his father, former president Bush, and Nixon's Secretary of State Henry Kissinger opened a new American embassy in Beijing. Because of Kissinger's secret visit to the Chinese capital in 1971 and Bush

senior's role as a high-level US diplomat in China during that decade, the Chinese leaders have declared them to be "old friends".

The first steps to open up China to foreign capital took place under Mao but were vastly expanded after his death under Deng Xiaoping. Having all but abandoned even the pretence of representing socialism, the CCP has increasingly relied on Chinese nationalism as the means of managing acute social tensions and cultivating a social base among the rising middle class. Like the emerging bourgeoisie itself, millions of well-paid professionals, ambitious entrepreneurs and speculators view their future as bound up with the rise of China.

Nationalism and Confucianism

Central to Chinese nationalism is Han chauvinism. While Han Chinese account for more than 90 percent of the country's population, 55 other nationalities and more than 100 million people make up the remainder. Right from the outset, the Maoist regime proved completely incapable of integrating these national minorities and rode roughshod over their democratic rights and cultural sensibilities. The Tibetan protests earlier this year and the threats by Muslim separatists from Xinjiang to disrupt the Games are the latest expression of the resentment and hostility that Beijing's policies produced.

Despite efforts to demonstrate national unity, Han chauvinism was a feature of the opening ceremony. A young Chinese girl initiated proceedings by singing "Ode to the Motherland". Her cute appearance could not conceal the fact that she stood apart from the children representing the other nationalities in China. While it may not have been evident to an international audience, the cameo was carefully choreographed to send an unmistakable message to the local audience, denoting the superior position of the Han Chinese.

Likewise, the classical Han costumes worn by thousands of performers promoted Han identity. The women were dressed like the palace ladies of the Tang Dynasty, in order to evoke the golden age of imperial China some 1,300 years ago. The ceremony also conveyed images of the "Middle Kingdom" as more technically advanced than the West before the modern era. China's aspirations to be a naval power were clearly reflected in the story of Chinese navigator Zheng He of the Ming Dynasty, who reached East Africa and possibly America long before the Europeans.

The ceremony's emphasis on space technology reflected a discussion taking place in ruling circles to the effect that although China missed out on becoming a capitalist power when it failed to develop as a naval power 500 years ago, it would not now fail to pursue the conquest of the future strategic battleground—outer space. A massive rocket tipped with a space capsule will be launched shortly after the Olympics. This will be the third manned flight since 2005—this time allowing for a space walk—aimed at further boosting nationalist fervour.

Beijing is seeking to win the support of layers of the middle class

for its perspective of becoming a major competitor with those powers that dominated China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Ci Lei, a young man watching the ceremony at an upscale downtown bar in Beijing told the *New York Times*: "For a lot of foreigners, the only image of China comes from old movies that make us look poor and pathetic. Now look at us. We showed the world we can build new subways and beautiful modern buildings. The Olympics will redefine the way people see us."

The reality is that Chinese capitalism is resting on shaky foundations, with super exploitation of the working class generating enormous social tensions. In order to promote President Hu Jintao's "harmonious society", the opening ceremony adopted Confucius as the representative of the country's philosophical heritage. Hundreds of performers dressed as Confucian scholars held bamboo scrolls and read out the master's words. When the ancient Greeks held the original Olympics, Confucianism was just one of a "hundred schools" in China. Confucianism was later chosen by the imperial rulers as an official ideology because its doctrine of a strict social hierarchy, rigid moral codes and absolute subservience to the authorities justified the oppression of the peasantry.

The revolutionary democrats and forerunners of the Communist Party declared war on Confucianism in the 1910s, seeing it as a chief obstacle to the development of democratic consciousness among the Chinese masses. Even until the 1990s, the Beijing regime placed more emphasis on other classical schools, especially those representing ancient materialism or egalitarian social ideas, in order to boost its claim to be socialist. The return of Confucianism followed the brutal repression of the working class in 1989 in Tiananmen Square. It is an ideology that justifies social inequality and dictatorial measures and thus meets up with the sentiments of the Chinese ruling elite and layers of the middle class who are deeply hostile to the working class and oppressed masses.

For all the attempts to obscure the explosive issues of the twentieth century, not one of them has been resolved. Behind the expensive pageantry of the Olympic opening ceremony, the profound contradictions of Chinese capitalism are building up. They will inevitably erupt in huge social struggles in the coming period.



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