

The Production of Space and Representation of Culture: A Case Study of the Opening Ceremony of Beijing Olympics

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Abstract

The construction of the Beijing National Stadium is a larger project of spatial practice. As a modern marvel used as the main venue of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, it entails numerous distinctive characteristics that modern public architectures exhibit, such as unique appearances, spacious architectural spaces, complex spatial architectonics, sense of aesthetics, etc. The production of the spaces of the Stadium facilitates the activities of cultural practices, making possible the presentations of the traditional Chinese culture on the stage of the opening ceremony. The traditional Chinese cultural elements such as scroll painting, Peking opera, Kunqu and traditional Chinese costumes like Hanfu are wonderfully displayed to showcase the world the rich, brilliant and profound traditional Chinese culture. This reflects China's cultural strategies in holding this epoch-making event, and meanwhile reveals that China as an emerging superpower is eager to show the world its cultural confidence in the new historical period of development.

Keywords: Spatial Practice; Modern Stage-Space; Traditional Cultural Elements; Artistic Performances; Representational Practice; Cultural Representation

Introduction

The cultures and ideologies in the western world had experienced significant changes in the 20th century. There were assertions about the end of various traditions. Within these phenomena and representations, the major shifts occurred had resulted in changes in ways of questioning, manners of speaking and modes of explaining, and thus brought about phenomenal alternations in the contemporary cultural and ideological paradigms. And people term these shifts as "turn", for example, turn of phenomenology, turn of ontology, turn of linguistics, turn of culture, turn of human body, turn of post-colonialism, turn of post-modernism, etc. Amongst these phenomena, issues related to space have been increasingly prominent, and therefore theoretical thinking on space has become an irresistible trend in the contemporary academic and intellectual world. People regard this phenomenon as the spatial turn. As one of the important events in the areas of social life, culture, politics, academic research and philosophical thinking, and many more, the spatial turn has posed urgent demand for scholars to look at contemporary humanities and social sciences with new dimensions, attempting to bring shifts on paradigms to these subjects and hoping to exert seminal impact on the studies of contemporary philosophy, sociology, the science of history, culture, etc. In particular, spatial thinking has been increasingly involved in sociological, philosophical, cultural and literary research.

Admittedly, One of the most important dimensions in spatial thinking is to study space in the context of spatial practice, which involves the production in space as well as the production of space, specifically referring to the production of a variety of things and a set of social relationships in space, and more importantly to the matter regarding the production of space itself. It is meant to study space as a social product, and especially aimed at exploring the intrinsic connections between the production of space and the representation of culture – that is how spatial practices carried out by humans help shape and re-shape spaces and endow them with new meanings and implications. As Henri Lefebvre elaborates in his influential spatial work entitled *The Production of Space*, “We may be sure that representations of space have a practical impact, that they intervene in and modify spatial textures ... Representations of space must therefore have a substantial role and a specific influence in the production of space. Their intervention occurs by way of construction – in other words, by way of architecture, conceived of not as the building of a particular structure ... but rather as a project embedded in a spatial context and a texture which call for ‘representation’ ...” (42). Therefore, to understand the relationships between the production of space and the representation of culture, it is necessary to clarify the term “representation”. Stuart Hall, a British cultural theorist and sociologist, in his book *REPRESENTATION: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, defines representation as a kind cultural practice which endows things with values and meanings. According to Hall, representation is a form of cultural practice which aims to signify symbolic meanings by using a system of signs. Thus, cultural practice is also called representational practices. Just as Hall points out, “The embodying of concepts, ideas and emotions in a symbolic form which can be transmitted and meaningfully interpreted is what we mean by ‘the practices of representation’. Meaning must enter the domain of these practices, if it is to circulate effectively within a culture. And it cannot be considered to have completed its ‘passage’ around the cultural circuit until it has been ‘decoded’ or intelligibly received at another point in the chain. ...” (Introduction 15). To make it clearer, Hall goes on to argue that “It is by our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them – how we present them – that we give them a meaning. In part, we give objects, people and events meaning by the frameworks of interpretation which we bring to them. In part, we give things meaning by how we use them, or integrate them into our everyday practices. It is our use of a pile of bricks and mortar which makes it a ‘house’; and what we feel, think or say about it that makes a ‘house’ a ‘home’. In part, we give things meaning by how we represent them – the words we use about them, the story we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualize them, the values we place on them. Culture, we may say, is involved in all those practices which are not simply genetically programmed into us ...” (3). Based on these arguments, Hall concludes that the understanding of the concept “representation” has historically adopted three approaches: reflectionism, intentionalism and constructionism. Constructionism taken by Hall as an approach for his theoretical research highlights cultural practices and meaning construction of the representation, which seem to reveal that the practices conducted by humans can be seen as cultural practices or signifying practices. This also implies that all humans’ material production practices and the outcomes of these activities are both representational. That is to say, the production process of anything is the construction process of its meaning through representation. For instance, home is not only a physical existence, but penetrated with emotions of its users and through whose experiences of the space to help construct

meanings for it. In this sense, home as an abstract concept as well as a concrete place within which meanings and values are generated through the free play of the agency of the users, or in other words, through spatial practices or representational practices.

Designing Modern Spaces for the Beijing Olympics

Based on Hall's theoretical elaborations, it is arguable that representational practice, as a form of cultural representation, is an important part of humans' spatial practices. In this light, taking the space of the 2008 Beijing Olympics as a case study would echo Hall's claims. It is known to all that Beijing National Stadium (hereinafter referred to as "the Stadium"), which was designed for use throughout the 2008 Beijing Olympics, had been taken as a main venue for the event. The Stadium is also known as the Bird's Nest, due to its outward appearance whose shape resembles a bird's nest. The Design was inspired by the study of Chinese ceramics, in which numerous steel beams are put into use to support the retractable roof of the Stadium. In so doing, it makes possible to shape the outlook of the architecture looking like a bird's nest. The initial visions of the design include taking into consideration myriad requirements for enhancing the functions of the architecture for the purpose of post-Olympic use. After the model of the "nest" proposal was approved by the professional panel and subsequently selected as the top design, the nest-scheme was thereafter officially adopted. The Basel-based architecture team Herzog & de Meuron who was responsible for designing the Stadium reveals that they in the very first place decided to bring something new into the design in part by spurning some of their traditionally conventional practices. As the Wikipedia article "Beijing National Stadium" says, "China wanted to have something new for this very important stadium". On the basis of these ideas and formulations, the design team has tried to make the Stadium somewhat porous like a colossal vessel. And two independent structures were also built in the process, which stand 50 feet apart with a red concrete seating bowl and the outer steel frame around it. In an attempt of discussing the ins and outs of the architectural style of the Stadium, it is hoped to make a conclusion that its architectonics is very much in line with the extraordinary features of modern public architectures.



Fig. 1. The dazzling appearance of the stadium under the night sky of Beijing (Source: Google)

As a modern marvel, the Stadium is organized in the styles of modern public architectures, which lay stress on the use values of their spaces. The construction of the modern spaces has taken into consideration particularly the performances and abilities of the architectures. Hu Miaosheng, an eminent spatial critic in China, studies the frequently-used organizing principles of spatial structures in modern architectures by looking into the construction of the stage-space. Hu, in his book *Reading Space: Aesthetics of Stage Design*, claims that a theatre space commonly adopts a multi-dimensional structure in order to create spaces for implementing actions and aesthetic experiences of, and psychological effect on the participants. Although Hu's spatial studies mainly focuses on the aesthetic values of the stage-space design, it is illuminating for the studies of the Beijing National Stadium as a modern public architectural space. Subsequently, it is to make an analysis of the modern features and multiple functions of the Stadium.

Analyzing the Features of Modern Public Architectures

Firstly, excellent spatial functions. Modernist architectures highlight the functions of spaces. Modernist architects claim that creating spaces with multiple functions is one of the most important missions that architects need to accomplish. Apart from designing a gorgeous appearance for the Stadium, the design team of the Beijing Olympics, which consist of the Swiss architects Herzog and de Meuron, China's Architecture Design & Research Group as well as Arup Group Limited, had attached great importance to deal with the spatial relationships between the stand and the performance venue. What psychological effect would the users of the space achieve when positing themselves within it? This had become a major concern in the design scheme. Undoubtedly the essential function of the Stadium is to serve the athletes and the audience. Thus, questions as how to enlarge its capacity so that it can accommodate more people; how to enhance the audio-visual effect of the space; how to achieve the best interactions amongst the users of the space, and the like, had become major concerns for the designers in formulating the nest-scheme design. Based on these considerations, the architects, Herzog and de Meuron, designed the stand in a bowl- shape for the stadium. The round-shaped stand enables the audience to reach visually every part of the venue during the performances, and also makes possible the effective interactions between the audience and the players within the setting. In addition, safety is an important indicator to show whether the spatial functions are perfected. Accordingly, the escape system of the Stadium like other key factors was prioritized in the whole design. In fact, the Stadium totally has 42 escape tunnels which were designed in the patterns of the cloisters. With this design, the staircases appear to be zigzag and not straight which can help prevent people from falling down and suffering injuries while escaping in emergent situations.

Secondly, Beijing is an ancient capital city which once housed many dynasties in the history of China. The Beijing city has taken the Forbidden City – which symbolizes the centre of power and politics – as the central axis running south to north. The axis runs through the Forbidden City and finally reaches the Olympic village. And the Stadium is located in the northern end of the axis. To combine the classic culture which is passed down through this Royal central axis with the sport spirits of the Olympic Games had constituted a great challenge for the designers. To resolve the problem, Herzog and de Meuron finally found out the solutions by studying the ancient Chinese containers, the jades made in the early stage of history, the pottery jars and porcelains appeared in the Song Dynasty, and other items which are related to the formation of traditional Chinese

culture. The designers imagined the architecture of the Stadium as a container, so the model of china wares is used for reference in the design of the Stadium. Moreover, they are bold to make use of red colour, as red is the dominant tone of the Royal Chinese architectures. Red thus is applied on the walls of the dispatch hall, the surface of the stand, and even chairs are painted with brightly-coloured red in the Stadium.

Thirdly, generally speaking, space is shaped by the structure. When the functions of architectures have been developed to such a level, it may raise higher demands for the size of spaces – that's to require for more spacious spaces. In the case of the Stadium, the difficulty of constructing a larger space lies in the structure which is used to support the roof of the architecture. In practice, the Stadium is made up of 12 reinforced concrete core-tubes, and the shear wall structure consists of a number of beams, plates and columns, some 14,700 pieces of prefabricated stand boards, large-span oblique beams and stands which consist of a lot of profiled components such as oblique beams and cylinders, circular beams, curving walls and many others. The steel structures that are composed of 24 truss gantries constitute the façade of the Stadium. Of which, most of them are straight lines. The upper layers of the steel structures are the ETFE single-layer tensioned membranes, and the under layers are the PTFE acoustic ceilings. The designers made full use of two materials, namely ETFE¹ and PTFE, in order to create desirable indoor lighting effect. Furthermore, the reinforced concretes and steels in free and organic forms are sufficiently used for the purpose of making into play malleability and tensile properties of the two materials, for creating ordinary indoor spaces in the hope of exerting the performances of the materials to the best. Meanwhile, advanced technologies also help to solve the problems of the stands. Different from those used in general-purposed stadiums, the stands specially made for the Stadium are segmented into three levels: upper, middle and lower, and these three levels are firmly and tightly connected together by using cantilever beams. In addition, these stands are expected to meet the need of providing good acoustic effect in the Stadium, for the overlapping stands can help reduce the distance between the first-row seating and the last one, aiming to enhance the experiences of the users in the Stadium.

Fourthly, the beauty of the form. In the earlier days, the *mise en forme* of architectures with large spaces failed to break the limitations of the technologies to create more reasonable and lightweight architectural images, but the development of technologies and the constant improvement of people's aesthetic consciousness have motivated the architects to try hands in constructing different kinds of structures for architectures. They have realized that structures designed with modern concepts have in common many *avant-garde* features and most majority of them are built with an appearance of exquisite beauty. It has become a fashionable trend that the architects are in pursuit of simpler structures, trying to abandon elements as thick walls, unnecessary materialized parts, etc. In the principles of design, modernist architects like Herzog and de Meuron are in favour of employing the technique of hollowing-out in their designs, which actually has long existed in the traditional oriental craft culture, and here it is combined with advanced technologies in an attempt of building modern structures with hollowing-out style.

Lastly, the colour and texture of space. The colour of space is inseparable from its texture. Only when the principles of colour-matching are addressed, can the problems of texture be dealt with. The Stadium is undoubtedly a masterpiece which appears to integrate Chinese traditional elements with internationally modern popular architectural properties. With the mixture of different materials and styles, the architecture is created

with a multiple functions. For example, the internal and external structures of the Stadium are covered with gray mineral steel meshes woven with transparent membrane materials. Also, the inner and outer sides of the third and fourth layers adopt hidden-framing glass curtain walls which are painted with glaze. The walls in the dispatch hall are made of linens and painted with red coatings, and parts of the ceiling plates and the bottom surfaces of the stand boards are sprayed with black and red coatings respectively. Machine-chopped stones are pieced together to lay the ground for the lobby.

Producing Fantastic Stage-Space for the Artistic Performances

Till now some analysis has been made on the construction of the space of the Stadium as a materialized and concrete entity. As a classic modern architecture, the production of the space of the Stadium is richly filled with the concepts and elements of modernity, which can be seen not only from the structures but also the functions that the Stadium itself displays. On this point, the theoretical hypothesis proposed by Hu can be used for reference. In Hu's spatial theories, the construction of the space of the Stadium exactly reflects the theory of four-in-one spatial structure which demonstrates the fourfold relations of motion space, perception space, aesthetic space and communication space. Amongst these relations, the core value of space lies in its use value which can provides coefficient of reference for space design. Motion space means that the actors carry out their actions within a specific location. For example, a theatre is a motion space in which the performers play out their activities; so a stage-space is the prerequisite for the actors to implement their programmes. And this is the use value of the motion space which lies in the heart of Hu's theories. The Stadium was used as the main venue throughout the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the construction of the stage-space for the opening ceremony has been considered as a big success, which had successfully facilitated the fulfilment of all prepared programmes. In this way, new meanings have been generated through the implementation of the actions of the actors in spaces. This is a form of spatial practices in relation to representation of space leading to signifying practices, which echoes Michel de Certeau's theoretical presumption, as he states in his famous work *The Practice of Everyday Life*, "These 'ways of operating' constitute the innumerable practices by means of which users re-appropriate the space organized by techniques by sociocultural production. ..." (13). With the help of modern stage technologies, along with other necessary tools and equipment, a fantastic stage-space with practical and aesthetic values was produced to make possible the performances presented in the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics. The stage-space is highly praised by people, especially the shapes, the colours, the lights and shadows and other aspects created in this stage-space are prominent. Undeniably, the magnificence, grandness and beauty of these performing scenes have won praises and admirations of the world. One may ask how it is possible or what had made this happen? Attempting to find answers to these questions would probably lead to some kinds of solutions. The following is to continue using the four-in-one spatial theories formulated by Hu to explore the principles of constructing stage-space out of the Stadium and aims to connect this mode of production of space with the representation of culture, hoping to bright forth some constructive insights of its own for this area of research.

New Features of Modern Stage-Space

Stage is not image but concrete space. This idea is overly emphasized in the work of designing modern stage-space. With the changes occurred in the modern design

principles, modern stage-space has been designed with bizarre features, which is made by the perfect integration of the architectural art and the stage technologies.

Firstly, at the level of architectural art. The architectural space and the stage-space share some commons in terms of practicability and artistry. The form of the stage-space is smaller than the architectural space's, but the stage-space has more dynamic structures than that of the architectural space. Thereby, the creation of stage always takes references from the architectural design.

Secondly, at the level of stage technologies. With the penetration of high technologies in the construction of both architectural space and stage-space, the two kinds of spaces are integrated in terms of forms. When advanced technology equipment is put into use, it can help create desirable stage-space, and in this case the forms of architectural space is heavily relied on to bring into play their flexible modes of operation, and meanwhile to make the performances to be presented in a better way.

The Values of Technologies in Constructing Modern Stage-Space

It goes without saying that performances are carried out in certain settings, or called stages. The conditions of stages are very decisive factors that would affect many aspects of the performances, for example, the performers' movements, the performance itself, the interactions between the audience and the performers, etc. Undoubtedly, the ranges, patterns, styles and other aspects are determined by the forms and status of the stage-space. The Beijing Olympic Stadium is a huge building with a massive ellipsoidal structure, and has the capacity of accommodating more than 90,000 spectators. In order to make the performances audible and visible to all participants, the design and creation of the stage-space within it must be carefully handled. To achieve this goal, the designers resorted to the image technology to project a virtual scroll painting in the centre of the performing venue on which all the programmes unfolded accompanied with the rhythms and melodies of the background music. Obviously, it is a very unique form of stage-space, which fully demonstrates the creative features of the design. Simultaneously, the cultural symbols like mountains, rivers, clouds, Chinese characters, Chinese ceramics, etc., elements that are most frequently-used in Chinese ink paintings, were projected on the surface of the scroll to showcase the world a beautiful picture laden with rich Chinese culture.



Fig. 2 A fantastic stage-space with perfect blend of colour and light. (Source: Google)

Exploring the Traditional Chinese Cultural Elements Displayed in the Performances

All the host countries take the opportunity of holding the Olympic Games to showcase the world their cultures. The Beijing Olympics is not exception. In order to present its age-old, rich, unique and profound traditional cultures, China spared no effort to create a grand feast of visual culture. A variety of traditional Chinese cultural elements were infiltrated in every detail of the whole performance, making the stage-space of the event a platform for cultural representations and the event itself a cultural gala.

A Scroll Painting Serving as the Stage of the Performances

The three concepts put forward by the Beijing Olympics are “Green, Technology, and Humanities”. To practice the concept of “High-tech Olympics”, the Beijing Olympics had been highly technology-assisted, that is a variety of advanced technologies such as aerospace materials, lifting stage, multimedia, LED system, high-tech equipment, etc., had been fully employed in the hope of constructing a desirable stage-space to present a spectacular show. The scroll painting used throughout the performances in the opening ceremony belongs to this kind of such high-tech product.

In general sense, scroll painting is an art form practiced primarily in East Asia. It commonly refers to a painting on a scroll in Asian traditions, distinguishing from hand scroll and hanging scroll. The scroll painting specially designed for the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics and used as a stage is different from the traditional scroll paintings. However, the model of the scroll is inspired by ancient Chinese scroll painting. There are tens of thousands of LEDs embedded in the scroll to produce myriad-coloured light. The lighting effect created by the LED system is closely matched with the performances to make miscellaneous fantastic images on the scroll, and the fantasy made by the lighting brings the audience into a dream world. Besides, power-driven devices are installed on the scroll so that it can be unfolded or folded by remote control whenever necessary in the proceeding of the performances. When unfolded, the scroll painting was turned into a huge LCD screen, on which traditional Chinese cultural elements like mountains, rivers, poems, ceramics – images that are commonly used in Chinese ink landscape paintings – are displayed, which symbolizes the long history of traditional Chinese culture. Besides, a clutch of images of “Auspicious Clouds”² are turned into the cross-section of the scroll painting, making it look like flowers in full bloom – a beauty which is beyond speech.



Fig. 3. A miraculous scroll painting used as the unique stage-space for the performances.
(Source: Xinhuanet)

Using the human body to draw on the scroll is a unique performance in the opening ceremony. It has been considered as a distinctive performance art. In this form of art, human body is used as medium, and through a set of actions executed by artists or other participants, to produce artworks or perform for the purpose of art exhibition. Thus, performance art is also known as artistic action, or body art and happening. Basically, performance art entails four fundamental elements, namely time, space, the presence of the actors, and the interactions between the actors and the public. Sometimes it is taken as an avant-garde form of art in the category of visual arts. A number of performers in the opening ceremony use their bodies as the medium to dance out a set of seemingly casual but actually well-designed movements. On this occasion, the human body is used as ink, while the scroll is a piece of drawing paper. A set of freehand dance acted out by the performers, accompanied by music emitting from the string-plucked musical instrument, generates a richly expressive Chinese scroll painting, even though with relatively simple images such as river, mountain, sun, moon and other signifiers in natural world. These themes are commonly expressed in the traditional Chinese art. This performance art takes place in specific time and space – in the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics and on a virtual scroll painting serving as stage-space of the performance inside the Beijing National Stadium, and with the support of a kind of so-called improvisation and a sense of aesthetics, its goal is to arouse reactions in the public. A scroll painting with images of sun and moon, mountains and rivers, is generated through the dancers' graceful movements and postures, showing a unique form of cultural representation. This also shows the creative use of the scroll painting in the event.

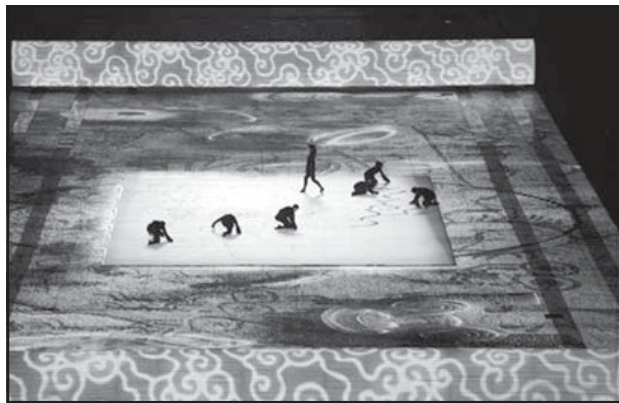


Fig. 4 Using the human body to draw as an distinctive form of performance art (Source: Google)

Peking Opera: The Quintessence of Chinese Culture

Peking opera or Beijing opera, once known as Ping opera, is one of the five major Chinese opera types. It emerged in Beijing in the mid-Qing dynasty (1636-1912) and became fully developed and won its popularity by the mid-19th century. Hui opera is the predecessor of Peking opera. Music of Peking opera can be divided into Xipi³ and Erhuang styles, accompanied by Huqin and gongs and drums. Peking opera is a comprehensive performing art, with an amalgamation of music, vocal performance, mime, dance, and acrobatics. It takes singing, chanting, doing or performing, fighting or martial arts, dancing as a whole to interpret a story through programmatic means. The roles of

the performers in the plays can be grouped into four major types: Sheng (the main male role), Dan (any female role), Jing (a male role) and Chou (a male clown role). The characters can be described as loyal and treacherous, beautiful and ugly, good and evil, etc. Each image is vivid and lifelike. Facial makeup, in which colouring is very crucial, is one of the most important techniques to be used for the purpose of describing the characters. Due to its popularity and influence, Peking opera has come to be regarded as the quintessence of Chinese culture, one of the cultural treasures of China. It is also known as the “national theatre” of China. In 2010, it was selected into the “List of Representative Works of Human Intangible Cultural Heritage”.

The performance of Peking opera in the opening ceremony displays the art of facial makeup. Facial makeup is a unique art in Chinese opera. It uses the technique of exaggeration in artistic expressions to combine realism and symbolism together to present the appearances of curtain characters. Judged by the appearances, comprehensive characteristics such as the character’s type, quality, personality, age, etc., can be suggested or even revealed. With the formation and development of opera, the art of facial makeup has become very colourful and magnificent. Based on the earlier studied conducted by some researchers, it is suggestive that all the faces of the characters in the display must be specially marked, and facial makeup must be outlined. In so doing, the characters need to highlight their faces in order to shape their images. The display of the art of facial makeup of Peking opera in the opening ceremony is based on a set of artistic, aesthetic as well as cultural values. Meanwhile, facial makeup is an important part of stage modeling in traditional Chinese opera, which will affect the overall effect of the stage art. The facial makeup of Peking opera has some artistic characteristics peculiar to itself, mainly including the following three points: decorative, procedural and symbolic, amongst which the symbolic one is distinctive. In the facial makeup of Peking opera, the use of the technique of symbolism is primarily reflected in two aspects, namely colour and shape.

Undoubtedly, colour is an essential constituent for the art of facial makeup in Peking opera. Admittedly, in the world every nation has its own understanding of and preference for colour. China holds sorts of perception and predilection of its own. The colouring in the facial makeup is closely bound up with the cultural traditions and the habits of life of the Chinese people. Every way of applying colours demonstrates specific implications. Colour rendering in facial makeup of Peking opera is extremely diversified. The frequently-used colours as red, yellow, blue, green, purple, black and white to express different symbolisms. To be specific, red colour, set as dominant tone, embodies the character’s quality as loyalty, integrity, bravery, perseverance, etc.; when used as secondary colour, red is endowed with such symbolisms as to indicate the tragedy of the characters. Yellow usually symbolizes ferocity, cruelty, treachery, insidiousness, calculation. And other colours are endowed with some specific connotations. Characters in Peking opera are not only expressed through the tinting of facial makeup, but also revealed by the types of facial makeup. There are 36 types of facial makeup in Peking opera, specifically a variation of the full face and sub-types as upright three-tile face, pointed three-tile face, flowered three-tile face, and old or faded three-tile face. Generally, the types of Peking opera are marked out by three irregularly patches of colour to indicate the characters’ characteristics, their roles in the plays, and many other aspects. The visual performance elements entailed in the performance of facial makeup exhibits the glamour of Peking opera which has been seen to follow other traditional arts in emphasizing meanings. The highest pursuit of the performance is to put beauty in every expression. Here lie the artistic and aesthetic characteristics of facial makeup art and it thus produces the cultural values of Peking opera.



Fig. 6. The performance of Peking opera on a movable stage in the opening ceremony.
(Source: Xinhuanet)



Fig. 5. A typical facial makeup in Peking opera (Source: Google)

Kunqu: An Ancient Form of Art of Traditional Chinese Opera

Kunqu, also known as Kunju, Kun opera or Kunqu opera, is an ancient form of Chinese opera. It evolved from the local tune of Kunshan in the end of Yuan dynasty and the early Ming dynasty in Kunshan County of Jiangsu province of China. It later became extremely popular across the country from the 16th to the 18th century. Research on historical materials reveals that, during the prosperous period of Tang dynasty, Kunqu was adored by people of all ranks and classes, from the nobles of the court to hawkers and pedlars in the street. The accompaniment instrument of Kunqu is mainly flute, supplemented by percussion instruments such as Sheng⁴, Xiao, Suona, Sanxian, Pipa, etc. The performance of Kunqu has its unique system and style. One of the features lies in the fact that the performance is full of lyrical expressions, every motion of the performers is tremendously delicate, and more strikingly the beauty of every movement can be achieved through the dancing and singing figures of the performers on the stage, demonstrating a beautiful stage performance form and pleasing to the eyes of the audience. Kunqu has been listed as one of the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO since 2001. *The Peony Pavilion*⁵, the representative work of Tang Xianzu, is also the representative work taking love as the subject matter in Kunqu.



Fig. 7. The stills of *Peony Pavilion* in Kunqu.
(Source: ChinaOpera)

Performers in the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics sing a famous song in Kunqu opera – that is “A Moonlit Night on the Spring River”. “A Moonlit Night on the Spring River” is a famous poem composed by Zhang Ruoxu, a Chinese poet of the early Tang dynasty. It has been taken as one of the most unique and influential Tang poems in the history of China, for it has been frequently used on different occasions in different periods. The poem depicts the intoxicating scenery of the moonlit Yangtze River in Spring Time. Images, such as flowers in full bloom, a bright moon shining in the sky and reflected in the water, constitute a fascinating picture of a night on Spring river. Wen Yiduo, an influential Chinese poet, spoke highly of the poem, calling it “the poem of all poems, the summit of all summits”⁶. The poem was adopted into Kunqu song by Zhou Luo⁷, a contemporary national first-level screenwriter in China. The adopted version is a typical classic work in terms of script, setting, programmatic music, performance, etc. In the performance of the opening ceremony, the performers sing the first four lines of the poem, which is translated into English as follow:

In Spring the river rises as high as sea,
And with the river’s rise the moon uprises bright.
She follows the rolling waves for ten thousand li,
And where the river flows, there overflows her light.

The unique performance, combined with beautiful melody of lute and dizzying stage background, creates an emotional scene which is unforgettably impressive. Moreover, the costumes and makeups of the performers are perfectly matched with the simple but elegant colour tone of the stage. What a forgettable creation it is!



Fig. 8. The affectionate performance of Kunqu in the opening ceremony (Source: Xinhuanet)

Hanfu: An Iconic Symbol of Traditional Chinese Culture

A series of the so-called “Chinoiserie” presented in the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics has brought a great shock to the world in stunning ways, and costume design is one of the highlights. Traditional Chinese costumes like Qipao⁸, Tangzhuang and Hanfu are used in many performances, amongst which the amazing presentation of the performers in Hanfu is particularly striking. Obviously, the use of the traditional Chinese costumes in the performances is an important way to augment the expressions of the traditional Chinese cultural elements in the opening ceremony, which aims to enhance the spread of Chinese national culture in the world. This is an important goal that the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics attempts to achieve as a large cultural event.

Du Fu, also called Tu Fu, a Chinese poet of Tang dynasty, in one of his poems entitled “Ode to the Beautiful Ladies”, describes the delicate clothing style adopted by the high-ups. There are two lines in the poem written as “Glowing in the twilight of Spring are their luxurious silk robes; Embroidered with peacocks in gilded threads and unicorns in silvery yarn”, describing the elegant dress-styles pursued by the upper classes to reveal the extravagant and luxurious lifestyles led by them. At all events, the poem more or less shows that the ancients were very fastidious in their dress, and also indicates that traditional Chinese clothing possesses specific cultural connotations and aesthetic implications of their own, which over time have developed into a significant part of traditional Chinese culture. As a unique style of dressing, Hanfu has been highly recommended in a variety of occasions. As an English loanword, Hanfu refers to a type of Chinese dress worn by the Han people in China. Traditionally, Hanfu consists of a robe or shirt commonly worn as the upper outer garment and a pleated skirt as lower garment. It is a remarkably noteworthy fact that the Han Chinese clothing has exerted profound influence upon the traditional clothing of many neighbouring cultures, for example, the Japanese kimono⁹ and the Vietnamese Ao giao linh. In the history of China, the expression “Strong Han and Flourishing Tang” refers to the flourishing times that occurred in the Han and Tang dynasties. For this, Hanfu can be used as a spectacular exhibition of these splendid and glorious periods in history. Hanfu is the carrier of the traditional Chinese culture. The presentation of gorgeous Han costumes, along with a large cast of performers, superb stage decoration, and accompanied by melodious classic music, represents the scenes of prosperity in Han and Tang dynasties on the stage, and at the meantime echoes the prosperous chapter of today’s society. Therefore, it has come to a conclusion that the performance of Hanfu in the opening ceremony is a means that China takes the Beijing Olympics as an important opportunity to showcase the world and carry forward the rich and profound traditional culture of the nation.



Fig. 9. The brightly-coloured Hanfu lighting up the atmosphere of the scene. (Source: Xinhuanet)

Conclusion

Based on the above analysis, this paper holds a view that the 2008 Beijing Olympics is not only a spectacular event in sports, but also a grand cultural gala aiming to display traditional Chinese culture. The Beijing National Stadium is undeniably a modern marvel, serving as the main venue of the Beijing Olympics. The construction of the space of the Stadium reflects the spatial concepts of mega events organized by modern society. The production of space lays emphasis on the selection of materials, the design of the architecture, spatial architectonics, etc., which aims to pursue the practical as well as aesthetic values of the spaces. Moreover, only when various tools and instruments, in particular a variety of cutting-edge technologies, are employed, can the creation of an ideal stage-space for the artistic performances in the opening ceremony become possible, and this subsequently provides the possibilities for the presentations of a series of traditional Chinese cultural elements: firstly, a virtual scroll painting, made of high technological content and used as the central stage of the performances, itself stands for the traditional Chinese scroll painting on the one hand, and on the other it is projected with a stream of traditional Chinese cultural symbols like ceramics, tea, etc.; secondly, the performance of the facial makeup of Peking opera provides another perspective for the world to know more about the traditional Chinese culture, since Peking opera is the quintessence of Chinese culture and one of the most precious cultural treasures of China; moreover, Kunqu opera is another cultural heritage of the Chinese nation – with its popularity and influence it helps to open up a new window for the world to peep at the rich and profound cultural background and achievement of the Chinese people; last but not the least, traditional costumes serve as the carriers of the traditional Chinese culture, and Hanfu taken as the representative of these unique cultural symbols, fully demonstrates an alternative aspect of the oriental culture which is characterized by the quality of gentleness and delicacy – female performers in red colour Hanfu in the performance truly impresses the world with the beauty and charming of the oriental women and this constitutes an important aspect of traditional Chinese culture. All in all, China, as an emerging superpower, tries to take this epoch-making opportunity to spread and carry forward its rich and brilliant traditional culture, and the successful holding of the Games has showed its determination and perseverance in doing the same.

Notes

- ¹ See Wikipedia. ETFE is a shortened form of Ethylene tetrafluoroethylene, referring to a fluorine-based plastic. The purpose of designing it is to resist corrosion under radical temperature. While PTFE is the abbreviation of Polytetrafluoroethylene, which is a synthetic fluoropolymer of tetrafluoroethylene that is widely applied in a variety of occasions.
- ² See ZentralDesigns on Google: <https://zentraldesigns.com/products/copy-of-hollowed-out-chinese-traditional-auspicious-clouds-sterling-silver-ring>. In traditional Chinese culture, "Auspicious Clouds" is given metaphorical sense, representing a beautiful symbol of endless luck. "Auspicious Clouds", pronounced in Chinese Pinyin as "xiangyun", refers to the heavens and also good luck, for the Chinese word for cloud is pronounced the same as yun meaning "luck" or "fortune".
- ³ See Wikipedia. Xipi, literally meaning "Skin Puppet Show", refers to the puppet show that originated in Shaanxi province. In the context of Peking opera, Xipi refers to the musical form in singing, which is believed to be derived from the historic Qinqiang by some scholars while others believe it was retained from Kunqu. Erhuang is a musical form in Peking opera. Some scholars believe that Erhuang evolves from the blowing tunes. It is one of the accents in opera. Distinct from Xipi, the musical form of Erhuang generally sounds more calmly stable and more concise and serious.
- ⁴ See Wikipedia. The Sheng is a Chinese mouth-blown free reed instrument consisting of vertical pipes. The Xiao is a Chinese vertical end-blown flute which is generally made of bamboo. The Suona, also called laba or haidi, is a Chinese double-reeded horn. The Sanxian, literally translated "three strings", is a Chinese lute – a three-stringed fretless plucked musical instrument. The Pipa is a traditional string-plucked instrument in East Asia, which has more than 2000 years history.
- ⁵ See Wikipedia. *The Peony Pavilion*, also named *The Return of Soul at the Peony Pavilion*, is a romantic play written in 1598 by Tang Xianzu, a playwright in Ming dynasty.
- ⁶ See *Fengsao Guodu* written by Ma Xiaodong. The book covers areas of literature, history, art, language, national conditions, places of interest, etc. In each area, 100 topics are selected for the purpose of introducing the basic overview of Chinese culture in a plain and easily understandable way and with lively writing.
- ⁷ Zhou Luo, born in 1981, is a young screenwriter in China. Zhou Luo has won many a China's Top Screenwriter Award, such as China Theatre Awards, Cao Yu Script Award, etc. She is the youngest to receive these prizes.
- ⁸ See Wikipedia. Qipao, also known as Cheongsam, is a type of traditional dress of Manchu origin. It is normally a high-necked and tight-fitting dress worn by women. The English word "Tangzhuang" is sometimes translated as a tang suit or jacket. It is a kind of Chinese jacket once worn by Manchu horseman. A straight collar is characteristic of this type of costume.
- ⁹ See Wikipedia. The kimono, literally meaning "thing to wear", is a kind of traditional Japanese clothing and taken as the national dress of Japan. It is a T-shaped, wrapped-front dress with square sleeves and a rectangular body. The ao giao linh, literally translated as "cross-collared robe", was a type of traditional garment worn by the Vietnamese before the 19th century.

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