China rejuvenated? Governmentality, subjectivity, and normativity: the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games

Chong, P. L. G.

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CLAIMING THE PAST,
PRESENTING THE PRESENT,
SELLING THE FUTURE
A new Beijing greets visitors to the 2008 Summer Olympic Games, a Beijing invigorated and transformed since it was awarded the Games seven years ago. The city has recovered its great cosmopolitan heritage as a meeting point for peoples, trade, and ideas. Bold new structures have risen into the skyline. In the streets and behind closed doors, Beijing seethes with an economic and cultural ferment that makes this one of the most exciting cities on earth.

(Foreword of Olympic City)

The Olympics have made Beijing even more magnificent, so magnificent that I could not recognize it.

(“Beijing under the Influence of the Olympics.” Hong Kong Connection)

The city of Beijing featured significantly in the promotion materials of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. A prime example is the Beijing Olympics emblem “Chinese Seal, Dancing Beijing.” Its wide circulation during the Olympics had marked its imprint on people’s minds: Whenever one saw the symbol, one was reminded of the Olympic city, Beijing. Beijing was a symbol assigned with national significance. The Beijing that was

164 This chapter will be published in Jeroen de Kloet and Lena Maria Scheen. Eds. Spectacle and the City — Urbanity in Popular Culture and Art in East Asia. (Chong 2012, forthcoming).
connected to the Olympic moment would be a city that was supposed to conjure up positive memories for local residents, citizens as well as the diasporas and the world at large. The ways in which the taxi drivers — mentioned in chapter 5 — were instructed to drive and behave properly was one exemplary illustration of this zeal of producing positive association of the Games to the city and to China.

A key Olympic slogan 新北京 新奥运 — literally “New Beijing, New Olympics” — indicates how the state envisioned the role of Beijing: a new Beijing bringing a new Olympics that would mark a new Chinese era. Beijing needed to dress up, with new clothes, to present a new and fresh look to welcome the world to China. This slogan’s English version, “New Beijing, Great Olympics,” differs from the Chinese version, probably because it would be considered too immodest to claim to produce a new Olympics in English. Suffice to say, by emphasizing the word new in its Chinese slogan, thus addressing predominantly the Chinese people, the official material drew the discursive power from a prevailing discourse in China that celebrated the idea of new and progress (de Kloet, Chong, and Liu 2008; Z. Zhang 2000; R. Chow 1991). The idea of new in “New Beijing, New Olympics,” however, urges us to ask the following questions: What was really “new” about New Beijing? Why was a New Beijing essential for bringing a New Olympics? What did a New Beijing mean for the state, the citizen, and the world? What defined “new” (and “old”) about Beijing? And, most significantly, how was this New Beijing represented and performed?

“New Beijing” was not simply an official catchphrase, but a key moment of collective memory and identity formation. Memory formation in place-representation — comparable to an act of storytelling — is crucial in shaping identity. This displays a governmental power, a conscious attempt that influences the ways people understand their identities, and has influences on the ways people interact with the world. Representing a city is a performative act, involving strategies and tactics of “selective remembering” and “selective forgetting” (Chang 2005). What is to be remembered is rendered visible — to be “on the map”; what is to be forgotten is forsaken and therefore rendered invisible — to be “off the map.” Memory formation is not an innocent act that simply conserves the past; rather, it involves a series of selection strategies that call the past into the present to cater for the contemporary needs and, intrinsically, shape the ways one anticipates the future. Thinking along this line, one needs to ask: Whose memories and what kinds of memories
CHAPTER 6 CLAIMING THE PAST, PRESENTING THE PRESENT, SELLING THE FUTURE:
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were selected to be significant and therefore deserved to be remembered? Similarly, whose and what memories were being denied and therefore forgotten? And, for what purposes did they serve? “New Beijing” was not only about making a new Beijing but also about how the “old” Beijing was being reimagined, remade, and represented.

Parallel to chapter 5, this chapter focuses on Olympics-led urban changes but with a specific focus on the ways in which official promotion strategies and tactics — exemplified through place-representation of the Olympic city Beijing — shaped a collective memory, that is, the memory of the population. How did the state seize the Olympic moment to imagine and represent a Beijing that shaped people’s views about the city, China, and Chineseness? It is important to note that urban transformation related to mega-events has been extensively studied (see, for example, Essex and Chalkley 1998; C. Hall 1987; Roche 1994; Van Den Berg, Braun, and Otgaar 2000). The selective process of memory and representation involved in place-making has also been addressed (see, for example, Davis 2005; Gold and Ward 1994; Gruffudd 1995; Zukin 1995; Chang 2005; Chang and Huang 2005). My aim here is not to repeat what has been studied but to demonstrate the ways in which these were done through a case study of Beijing during the 2008 Games.

Concepts of disappearance, reappearance, and appearance are central in discussing the city as a material and visual site of memory and identity formation. Driven by the emergence of the real estate market, the rapid urban development in Beijing since the 1990s has generated a lot of discussion about the disappearance of the once familiar landscape and the adverse impacts the urban development have brought about (see, for example, Acharya 2005; Fang and Zhang 2003; Lai and Lee 2006; Visser 2004; Wu 2000). This discussion reached its height during the period around the Olympics, centering predominantly on the destructive aspects of this project of China’s reappearance in the global arena (see, for example, Broudehoux 2007; Marvin 2008; Donald 2010). Theoretical insights from Abbas’ analysis of (post)colonial Hong Kong (1997) and Shanghai (2000) in the 1990s offer a way of rethinking the notions of disappearance and reappearance in the politics of memory production.

Ackbar Abbas (1997), writing against the backdrop of the imminent return of Hong Kong to China, examines the politics of cultural space of (post)colonial Hong Kong through an analysis of architecture, films, photography, and literature. Central to his
argument is the politics of disappearance that require us to take the local contexts into consideration. In the case of Hong Kong, he asserts that the notion of disappearance is a multifaceted and dynamic one. To Abbas, disappearance is not simply about “nonappearance, absence, or lack of presence” (1997: 7). Drawing on Freud’s idea of “negative hallucination,” Abbas elaborates that disappearance should be understood as misrecognition: “not seeing what is there” as well as “recognizing a thing as something else” (ibid.: 6–7). Disappearance is intimately related to representation. It is in representation that one sees how disappearance is manifested, “many instances of this [disappearance] in cinema, architecture, and writing, where disappearance is not a matter of effacement but of replacement and substitution, where the perceived danger is recontained through representations that are familiar and plausible” (ibid.: 8). One of the examples he gives is on the preservation of Flagstaff House in the form of a Chinese teaware museum. The historical building was preserved, but the associated colonial history was emptied out and substituted by something else, in this case, it was the appearance of Chinese culture — tea culture.

Abbas sees disappearance as something ambivalent and double-edged. For instance, disappearance associated with the politics of preservation presents a problematic side when preservation erases cultural memories of the past (ibid.: 80). However, he also demonstrates that disappearance is not simply a threat; it is also a productive force. It was the imminent disappearing of Hong Kong that gave birth to a booming interest in the discussion of Hong Kong culture and the identity of Hong Kong people (ibid.: 14). In this light, disappearance offers the opportunity of potential change, as “not all identities are worth preserving” (ibid.). When one form of identity disappears, it is the moment for a new form of identity to be invented. This generative aspect of the notion of disappearance strikes a chord with Foucault’s notion of power — power generates actions instead of taking away things. In a word, Abbas argues that what seems to be new in Hong Kong is always intimately linked to the conditions of disappearance. He writes, Hong Kong culture is “a culture of disappearance” (2000: 777).

In contrast to Hong Kong, Abbas argues, the case of Shanghai exemplifies a culture of reappearance, “a reappearance coinciding with China’s reinscription, after decades of closure, into global economy” (ibid.: 779). Paralleling the construction of a new Shanghai — building new skyscrapers and new infrastructure — was Shanghai’s booming interest in
preservation since the 1990s. This keen interest in preservation was, Abbas believes, not about preserving “cultural heritage.” Rather, it was driven by a strategic vision about Shanghai’s future, in his words, “the past allows the present to pursue the future” (ibid.: 780). Shanghai’s reappearance was a reappearance that tried to capture its legendary past to boost its attractiveness. These preservation projects were crucial for the city’s development in three ways: The first was the potential economic appeal — an attractive historical past drew tourists’ money and increased the city’s image for foreign competitiveness; the second was how preservation helped revitalize and gentrify decaying urban areas; and, the third, which seems to be most important in Abbas’ opinion, was how the state, through intervening in the municipal’s urban policy, asserted its ruling authority by guiding the city’s future development, and, in the meantime, found an opportunity to meet private sectors’ demand for economic interests. Shanghai, through the preservation of the past, became a “City of Culture” (ibid.: 781). Preservation has assisted Shanghai to reappear on the global stage.

While Abbas’ analysis is based upon a specific context in Hong Kong (1997) and in Shanghai (2000), I will explore his politics of cultural space and memory production in a different context — the Beijing that was caught in the wind of the Olympics. Beijing, as the cultural and political center of today’s China, is in many ways different from Hong Kong — a (post)colonial city struggling with the disappearance of its culture and identity, and from Shanghai — a re-emerging Chinese city attempting to recapture its past glamour after forty years of disappearance.

My analysis is structured according to three temporalities: The first section focuses on remembering the city, showing how the past appeared, and reappeared — through the preservation project of Qianmen (前门) — in the making of a New Beijing. The second section, re-inventing the city, shows how the Olympic city was built on the notion of disappearance, namely how the representation of the Olympic present was built upon a replacement or substitution of history. The Olympic Green is the focus of this analysis. The third section looks at how the future of Beijing is imagined.
RE-MEMBERING THE CITY (THE PAST)

Walking in the city of Beijing, one could easily spot passers-by carrying a single-lens reflex (SLR) camera taking pictures of the city that was in the midst of great transformation. Some of them — including myself — wanted to capture the moment before the changes substituted and replaced what the site seemed to represent. Memory takes many forms; the most discernible two are individual memory and collective memory. In its most general sense, collective memory is about shared, sometimes imagined, experiences. The construction of a national and cultural identity needs collective memories. It is a way to bind people to an imagined community (B. Anderson 1983; Kong 1999; Bardenstein 1999). The act of constructing collective memory involves processes of “selective remembering” and “selective forgetting”: Members of a community assemble and interpret the memory of the community’s own past and present, which helps strengthen the community’s own uniqueness vis-à-vis its alterity (Bardenstein 1999; Chang 2005). The act itself is a dynamic, negotiable, and contested process: It can be performed as an act of resistance, like Palestinians’ use of cultural symbols to counter their displacement (Bardenstein 1999), or like the invention of a Hong Kong identity in the face of Hong Kong’s imminent return to China (Abbas 1997; or see for example, A. Fung 2001); or, it can be an act initiated by officials or diverse interests groups to shape an identity to achieve their political and economic goals (see, for example, Bunnell 1999; Chang and Huang 2005). An officially sanctioned memory does not always work toward the will of the initiators, which makes the act of memory production a highly contested arena. Memory need not be about the past per se; similarly, nostalgia does not always need memory (Appadurai 1996). Imagination is all that memory needs. This is what Huyssen calls “imagined memories” (2000: 27). The past and the future, together with the present, are called to exist in the imagination of memories.

The making of “New Beijing” did not imply that everything in Beijing was built from scratch. Rather, this project was one that utilized the past — capitalizing on the historical capital — in conjunction with the new and (ultra)modern. Through the case of Qianmen (前门),165 the area south of Tiananmen where hutongs were demolished to make place for a shopping district with Chinese characteristics, I examine the role of preservation

165 In some of the representation tools, Qianmen-Dashilan (前门 - 大栅栏) is used to refer to the Qianmen area. Dashilan is located right next to Qianmen street.
in the construction of New Beijing. I will show how the past appeared, or reappeared, to form a map of places with a bountiful of history and facts that represented a “New Beijing.”

Preservation, in its general sense, is to protect something from falling apart or decaying. It is usually thought of as something constructive, as it helps conserve a past that is otherwise destroyed and will be forgotten. It seemingly saves the memory of a people from being forgotten. However, on closer inspection, projects of preservation pertaining to urban development are not that innocent (see, for example, Chang 2005; Chang and Huang 2005; Peleggi 2005). As Abbas writes, “preservation is selective and tends to exclude the dirt and pain” (1997: 66).

Figure 6.1: Qianmen under construction was surrounded by paper walls with imaginary of a Qianmen-to-be, taken on June 4, 2008.

The preservation of Qianmen was not an arbitrary choice. Quite the contrary, this preservation project, because of Qianmen’s historical connection and geographical proximity to the Forbidden City, played a key role in the imaginary of a “New Beijing.” This project was implemented in the name of preservation, a preservation that claimed to insist on “renovation without demolition” (宁修不拆) and to restore its original look (古
风貌)，与传统和现代元素的结合。在实际的语境中，整个项目涉及大范围的旧胡同拆除，随后重建、再创造和文化符号的安装。图6.1是新修复的前门的图片。在街的开头是牌坊，在一整条街看来，就像一个普通的唐人街。在这种情况下的保护更像是保护表面，而不是其物质性。它就像一个没有内容的旧盒子。保护项目正式开始于2006年。经过两年的建设，于北京奥运会开幕的前两天，即2008年8月8日，对公众开放。前门周围的区域一直是老北京的象征。拆除和重新塑造这个老北京吸引了大量媒体的关注。

前门位于故宫的南面，前门——即大门，是通往皇宫的门。距离京城的中心只有几步。天安门广场是新时代北京的权力中心，象征性地标示了1949年毛泽东宣布新中国成立的时刻（L. Dong 1988; Wu 1991; King and Kusno 2000）。直到今天，大多数正式仪式都在广场举行。故宫是这座城市历史发展的象征，被北京规划展览馆视作讲述北京和中国故事的中心物体。168这些地点的象征意义可以从北京的地图中清晰地看出。这些地点在任何北京地图上都被标记为中心。图也可以作为一种声明，正如文化批评家Hubert Dreyfus和Paul Rabinow所指出的：“地图可以是声明，如果它们被用作一个地理区域的代表，甚至打字机键盘的布局图也可以是声明，如果它出现在手册中。”

167 The “Western” media tended to focus on the demolition of this area whereas the Chinese media focused largely on the remaking of this old Beijing.
168 See, for example, The City of Eternity [不朽之城]. n.d. DVD. Beijing Planning Exhibition Hall [北京规划展览馆] and Chinese Science and Cultural Audiovisual Publishing House [中国科学文化音像出版社].
as a representation of the way the letters of a keyboard are standardly arranged” (1982: 45). Geographer Doreen Massey also points out that maps are means of representation that “embodies a particular way of understanding, a particular interpretation of the place it is depicting” (1995: 20). Looking at the map, one can easily identify this area as the central point where the story of Beijing unfolds and, where the significance of other places is measured.

Figure 6.2: The center of Beijing in Map of Beijing: Beijing Welcomes You.
Preservation projects like this were not conflicting with or contradicting the larger discourse of “New Beijing.” Similar to Shanghai, the zeal to preserve the old Beijing was the state’s plan to capitalize on the city’s “celebrated” old days and the city’s assumed rich historical past for its contemporary use and future development. Preservation in Beijing—as part of the mega Olympic project—marked the reappearance of Beijing and China in the global arena, after a century of national humiliation (Brownell 2008; Callahan 2004; Callahan 2006; Close, Askew, and Xu 2007; R. Ong 2004; G. Xu 2008a). Just like history is never solely about the past, it is also always about the present and the future. The past captured in the present helped further the developmental plan of this “New Beijing” project.

Historical information, understood as selected “facts” such as narratives of origin, past patrons, legends of the past, and images, is crucial to authenticate the site’s “place in history” (Peleggi, 2005: 262). Built in the Ming Dynasty, Qianmen is “the first and the oldest commercial street in Beijing,” which is mentioned in almost all the representation tools. The use of these superlatives certifies its special place in history and its significance in the population’s memories. Classified under the section of shopping in the map and in the official guide, Qianmen is well-remembered for its connection with some of the well-known shops, *laozhibao* (老字号), translated as “time-honored brand” businesses. It presents
itself as the birth-place of many legendary Chinese shops and the legendary stories related to these shops. The Qianmen area has been a prosperous place, where ordinary Beijingers would eat (for example, at Yuechenzhai 月盛斋),\textsuperscript{169} shop (for example, at Qianxiangyi 谦祥益 and Ruifuxiang 瑞蚨祥),\textsuperscript{170} seek medical health advice (e.g. Tongrentang 同仁堂),\textsuperscript{171} and find their entertainment (for example, Guanghe Theatre).\textsuperscript{172} These narratives call forth a sense of nostalgia linked to these shops, each of them has its own legendary past and stories. For example, Emperor Kangxi (康熙) visited Duoyichu (都一处)\textsuperscript{173} and gave it the name it has now, Empress Dowager Cixi (慈禧太后) demanded the food from Yuechenzhai, and the famous Peking opera artist Mei Lanfang (梅兰芳) performed at Guanghe Theatre. Added together, these narratives — despite their selectiveness — are powerful discursive tools that enhance the place’s historical heritage.

Qianmen-Dashilan (前门–大栅栏) is said to “have reflected the city’s sometimes turbulent history” (Beijing Official Guide: 97); this turbulent history is nonetheless not visible: It disappears in its representation. The history of this place is condensed into a few old photos installed on some buildings in the street. All these representations of the past are highly selective: a bit of Ming dynasty, a bit of Qing dynasty, and a bit of the early republican time (1911–1948/49) in the 1910s. The non-presence of the period from the early twentieth century to contemporary China is an act of selective forgetting that breeds a collective amnesia. This collective amnesia/forgetting, to draw on Abbas’ argument, is not about not remembering, but should be understood it as “remembering as something else, i.e. forgetting is additive not subtractive.” (Abbas 2012, forthcoming).

\textsuperscript{169} Yuechenzhai is a shop selling (halal) meat products. The shop has been in existence since the Qing Qianlong era (清朝乾隆年間) in 1775.

\textsuperscript{170} Qianxiangyi and Ruifuxiang specialize in silk fabrics and silk garments, the former originated in 1840 and the latter in 1862.

\textsuperscript{171} Tongrentang specializes in Chinese medicine; it was founded in 1669 during the Qing Kangxi era (清朝康熙年間).

\textsuperscript{172} Guanghe Theatre was the most famous theatre in Beijing during the Qing dynasty.

\textsuperscript{173} Duoyichu is a restaurant, dating back to 1742 in the Qing Qianlong era.
Figure 6.4: Old photos of the past were installed on the building to exhibit its history, taken on September 13, 2008, a month after Qianmen’s opening.

To stage an atmosphere of “Chineseness,” cultural symbols and items such as the pailou/paifang, lampposts and flowerpots with “Chinese characteristics” (see, for example, figure 6.3 and 6.5), and sculptures of historical people have been installed on the street. The past is reduced to be a decoration of the “centuries-old shopping street” (Beijing Official Guide: 97). The same applies to the use of the term laozibao in its promotion: Laozibao becomes only a decorative term void of the original meaning of laozibao. The social relations associated with laozibao — loyalties and trust from the customers and a close clientele relation — disappear in the preservation project. Some of the laozibao reopened after the renovation project only have the name of the original laozibao. They have been sold and now are either owned by the state or other companies. Yuechenzai is a case in point, the one in Qianmen now is “Yuechenzai at Zhengyangmen” (正阳门月盛齋) and is
state-owned, while the “real” laozhibao — renamed as “The Ma Family’s Yuechenzhai at Hubujie” (户部街马记月盛斋) — was reopened after the economic reforms in Houhai (后海).  

The new Qianmen could be called a “mnemonic site” (Nora 1989), a site designated by the state to sell nostalgia as a commodity that is void of any shared social memory of any groups (Chang 2005: 250; Peleggi 2005:263). It is a constructed Chinatown deprived of the diasporic meanings of a Chinatown. Generic symbols of Chineseness such as the dragons, lanterns, and drums that have circulated in popular media productions such as Hollywood films have been placed on site. It is, to use King and Kusno’s phrase, like an act of “cut and paste”: copying an urban architectural style to paste it in a different social and cultural context, with some editing here and there to construct the “new” (2000: 47). Today, the image of a Chinatown is comparable to Abbas’ description of “placeless” buildings that can be found in many cities. These neighborhoods make use of similar generic Chineseness symbols like the pailou/paijiang, “Chinese” symbols and items, and Chinese street names to attract visitors (see, for example, K. Anderson, 1987; Chang, 1999; 

174 Houhai is an area known for its nightlife, with many popular restaurants and bars.
It can be argued that the newly restored Qianmen looks more like a film set, a simulacrum of the once-lived area (Baudrillard 1994). It is like a Disneyland, a theme park with a “Chinese” theme that has been actively promoted as the new trendy shopping street with its past glamour. The rent has skyrocketed, old shops can hardly return to their original sites; rather, the place has attracted many international brands such as Starbucks, Uniqlo, H&M, ZARA, shops that one can find in any main shopping streets/malls around the world.

Figure 6.6: Paper wall built to hide the less appealing scenes behind the Qianmen area.

175 The image of Chinatown with the pailou/paifang appeals to people’s imaginary of Chinatown. The image circulates so much that self-proclaimed Chinatowns around the world are joining in the zeal to build one. This includes Amsterdam where Chinese entrepreneurs and the city government have been discussing for years to build a pailou/paifang to attract visitors.
The preservation project in Qianmen captured the larger global urban trend of heritage industry — commodification of the bygones (Chang 1997, 1999; Peleggi 2005; Hewison 1987) — to enhance the city’s historical image in the making of a “New Beijing.” The past, accompanied by the imagined memories of it, sells better than the future. The past does not exist until one claims its present: “present pasts” (Huyssen 2000). Yet, this performance of a legendary past has been rather partial and superficial: This area is surrounded by a decaying local residential-cum-commercial area that has undergone (never-ending) demolition. To make the less pleasant surroundings “disappear,” walls — either paper or concrete — were built to hide them (see figure 6.6).

RE-INVENTING THE CITY (THE PRESENT)

In the Opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics, twenty-nine giant firework footprints figuratively walked from Tiananmen Square, along the Central Axis, to the National Stadium (the Bird’s Nest) in the Olympic Green. This performance symbolically marked a visible trail of China’s development: from the center of Chinese civilization of the past to the center of global attention at the present. This performance resonated with the narrative sequences of Beijing in many official materials: The narration often started with the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square, then moved along the Central Axis, reaching the modern and joyous Bird’s Nest in the Olympic Green (see, for example, 2008 Beijing Olympics, Today’s Beijing, New Beijing).

The Central Axis is not a historical site like the Forbidden City or the Temple of Heaven; and yet, because of its recent connection with the Olympic site, it is promoted as a landmark, a historical achievement with seven hundred years of history. The descriptions in English often say that the Olympic Green is “located on the north end of the Central Axis of the Beijing City” (2008 Beijing Olympics, Beijing Official Guide: 5); or, alternatively, the Central Axis is “stretching all the way to the Olympic Green” (Olympic City: 36).

Interestingly, the description in Chinese says that the Central Axis ends at the Drum and Bell Tower176 — not the Olympic Green. It seems logical: If the Central Axis has a 700-year history, it is quite unlikely that it ends at today’s Olympic Green. The difference

176 It does not say when exactly the Drum and Bell Tower was built, but according to the description and the emphasis on the connection between the Central Axis and the Drum and Bell Tower, the latter should have been built around seven hundred years ago.
between the Chinese and English materials could very well be a different point of emphasis to cater for different audiences — the Chinese version emphasized the historical past while the English version selected (or, maybe more precise to say, summarized) what the producers believed would be important and enough for the English readers to know. Suffice to say, the Central Axis was invoked to connect the past and the present.

The present is the time period between the past and the future, it is “the location, both source and product, of cultural memory” (Bal and Vanderburgh 1999: 3). The present represented here was a reinvention: It was a present that was built on disappearance and this disappearance, following Abbas’ arguments, should be understood as a form of misrecognition, not simply absence or lack of presence (1997:7). The Central Axis is one such example demonstrating the ways in which the meaning of a site is alternated, selectively (mis-)presented to mark its connection with other sites — the historical and cultural “past” of the Forbidden City and the modern “present” of the Olympic Green. The story of the Central Axis ends at its connecting point with the Olympic Green, what lies beyond is rendered not important, therefore not represented — a vacuous space.
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The Olympic Green is an emblematic site/sight of how a “New Beijing” was reinvented. Its importance was projected on the map (figure 6.7). This 3-dimensional map directed the gaze toward three areas of significance: the political and cultural center (the heart of Beijing), the financial and economic center (the Chaoyang District), and the new political and cultural center (the Olympic Green in the north). The Olympic Green is the site of China’s Olympic memory. Given its political significance, the area was designed to embody the actively promoted image of a “New Beijing,” an image of the present representing progress, modernness, and open-mindedness that set an example for a promising future. The Olympic Green has an area of 1,159 hectares. It was the home of most of the Olympic venues, including the Bird’s Nest, the Water Cube, the Olympic Village, Main Press Center, and the Olympic Forest Park. When I visited Beijing in 2011 (three and half years after the Olympics), the charm of this Olympic legend did not fade. It still seemed to draw visitors from different corners of China and the world.
Unlike the preservation projects of historical sites, the Olympic Green has been presented as something built from scratch, like a drawing on a blank sheet. What was never told in the official promotion materials were the stories about the site: What was it before the Olympic Green was built? Questions related to urban removal and demolition were selectively downplayed and replaced by continuous positive reporting of stories related to the construction of Olympic venues.

The Olympic Green, given its spacious spatial design that housed most of the attention-drawing venues, drew together a population of diverse groups during the Games. The area was comparable to a cosmopolitan space, a space in which individuals knew how to respect otherness (Abbas 2000; Appiah 2006). The joyous carnival-like atmosphere seemed to live up to the cosmopolitan ideal promoted by the slogan “One World, One Dream.” The global China-bashing after the Tibet demonstrations and the subsequent tensions followed by the global contestations, for some curious reason, seemed to disappear; what was left was a sense of harmonious coexistence of differences. I argue that this cosmopolitan image associated with the Olympic Green was made possible by, first of all, selectively forgetting the efforts of migrant workers who built the venues and managed to finish the projects on time. News about accidents related to the construction was largely
unheard. Also, the presumably “unpleasant” looks of the workers were believed to contradict the “pleasant” looks of the city. They were persuaded to return home or to move to another job in another city before the Games started. Second, it was also made possible by selectively downplaying the news about strict visa requirements that deterred any potential demonstrators from entering the country. Third, the area was meticulously guarded by countless security checkpoints and security police; its cosmopolitan image was made possible by carefully securing its boundaries and stringent overall surveillance — practices that to some extent were rendered invisible to the general public (Chong, de Kloet, and Zeng 2012 forthcoming).

Architecture, because of its strong association with a place, is wedded to a city’s assumed identity. The BOCOG and the Beijing Municipal Planning Commission had seized the global place-marketing trend by using architecture as advertising tools. Two prominent examples are the Bird’s Nest, designed by Swiss architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, with the help of Beijing artist and cultural entrepreneur Ai Weiwei; and the Water Cube, co-designed by PTW Architects (an Australian architecture firm) and CCDI (China Construction Design International). Yet, this “going-global” ambition was not without contestations, some criticized that China had become “the laboratory for
foreign architects” and was losing its “authentic character” (mentioned in, for example, Ren 2008).

![Figure 6.10: Cultural symbols signifying “Chineseness” were installed inside the subway station, taken on August 23, 2008.](image)

Interestingly, in highlighting the design features of the Bird’s Nest and the Water Cube, the “foreign” presence was replaced by an emphasis on Chinese tradition:

> [The] designs have adopted the traditional Chinese philosophy: the sky is round and the earth is a square (天圆地方). The two stadiums, one is round symbolizing the sky and the masculine, the other is square symbolizing the femininity which perfectly caters to the Chinese spirit of the unity of the universe and the humans (天人合人). (2008 Beijing Olympics)

This selective forgetting of foreign architects was also found in media productions and official promotion materials, such as a documentary on the Bird’s Nest, The Bird’s Nest — Where a Dream Begins, and Olympic City. The focuses were placed on how amazing the buildings were and how the construction projects were carried out; the architects’ names
were never brought up. Cultural symbols representing “tradition” and Chineseness were
installed around the Olympic Green, as if to tell the public that in pursuing modernity,
tradition would not be forgotten and both could coexist harmoniously. This was made clear
in Today’s Beijing, the film asserts that “alongside the new development, the historical
features of ancient Beijing will also be carefully preserved, and its cultural characteristics
will be inherited to coordinate the past, the present and the future.” The accompanying
image showed a few senior Chinese and a young boy practicing tai-chi (or, tai-ji in
Mandarin) in the park, from the park it zoomed in on the Bird’s Nest and the Water Cube.

**MAPPING BEIJING’S FUTURE (THE FUTURE)**

The future is a time unknown yet made foreseeable by plans and expectations. It is
not yet a memory but an imagined memory in the making. In the film clip New Beijing, it
was made very clear that the image of “New Beijing” was based upon Beijing’s recent
development. The image sequence went as follows: the Forbidden City, a carnival-like
Tiananmen Square (with colorful air balloons flying above it), the National Theatre,
Beijing’s Central Axis, the Olympic Green, the Bird’s Nest, the Water Cube, Petrochina
Plaza, Kaichen Plaza, Huarun Plaza, West area of Zhongguancun, New Capital Airport,
Xizhimen Transportation Centre, the Financial Street, Xidan Bookstore, CBD, CCTV, and
a panoramic night view of the city.

The “New Beijing” represented here was a clean, tidy, efficient, technologically-
advanced city, and a somewhat mechanical one that did not have much human presence. It
was strikingly similar to teasers promoting sales of real estate. It is also important to note
that the film clip was not made up of “real” photographic images but graphic
constructions. It (con)fused the present with the future, on the one hand; and, on the other
hand, it seemed to convince us that a promising future was proceeding apace as one could
recognize the existing buildings. Time and speed matter: The faster the development is, the
brighter the future will look. This sense of speed is in tune with the general discourse of
pursuing newness. Progress and change were wrapped in the larger discourse of “new” in
China. This discourse could be dated back as early as the nineteenth century, when China
fell prey to Western imperialism. Over the course of a century and half, China had been
captured up in this pursuit of speeding up the pace of modernization in order to be on a par
with the West. To quote Z. Zhang (2000), “time has become a space in the global arena
waiting to be filled or conquered” (100). The future of Beijing, and China, had to be one that succeeded in making a great leap forward — conquering time and making progress. In anticipation of a promising future, the present was represented to be progressing toward a well-planned future. Just as Debord mentions in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1995 [1968]), contemporary social life can be understood, in his words, as “the decline of being into having, and having into merely appearing” (17). The spectacle of the future presented here shows that what the future appears to be is more important than what it actually is.

To map out Beijing’s future is to carve out a space to make certain Beijing’s and China’s reappearance on the world stage. Vision and planning, the focus of this section, are central in mapping Beijing’s future. Having a good vision and planning for the future of Beijing, and subsequently, its projected (symbolic) significance for China, are important for the state to claim ruling legitimacy. China needs to demonstrate its competence to bring progress and prosperity, and to maintain stability and social order (Shue 2004). Being able to put visions onto a map of plans demonstrates a set of productive power — “biopolitics” — a systemic way of managing life and its reproduction (Foucault 1980b, 2003a).

The vision for Beijing’s future was to become “a national capital,” “an international metropolis,” “a cultural city,” and “a livable city” (*Today’s Beijing, Olympic City, Beijing Investment Guide 2008–2009*). Beijing Investment Guide 2008–2009 had a clear elaboration on how these four visions would be achieved, so had *Today’s Beijing*: The vision of “a national capital” had a bird’s-eye view of Tiananmen Square. It was a status that needed to be maintained, rather than achieved. Its articulation served as a reminder of its status, not a vision per se. The vision of “an international metropolis” had an image of skyscrapers with greens in the forefront, an image resembling New York City (skyscrapers and Central Park). The idea of catching up with the (economic) developed others was the most prominent here. It was a vision to place Beijing in the league of world cities. Skyscrapers symbolize modernity and development. The green park represents an eco-friendly, relaxing, and leisurely space. The message was that urban development did not take away quality of life. The vision of “a cultural city” showed an image of the Forbidden City. Just like the preservation projects and the installation of Chinese symbols mentioned earlier, it reassured that in pursuing modernity, tradition was not forsaken. “A livable city” had an image of green and nature. It was as if making a promise of not sacrificing the environment in its
pace of development. These visions together made up an imaginary of the future Beijing—a selective way of remembering the future.

An advanced transportation system and infrastructure featured significantly in these four visions and in Beijing’s overall development plan. A well-developed transportation system symbolizes mobility that stands for modernity, progress, and technology. It is a key aspect for an international metropolis. When talking about Olympics-led urban transformation, infrastructure was one of the first items to be mentioned: “from wider roads and fresh taxi fleets to new parks and entertainment districts” (*Olympic City*: 5). The past was often drawn in to make Beijing’s progress today and its foreseeable future salient. In *Olympic City*, it says:

Twenty years ago, bicycles ruled the roads in Beijing and private cars were virtually unknown. Economic development and the rise of an affluent middles class have transformed the urban environment. There are now more than three million cars in the city and the road network has expanded accordingly. (120)

The presence of bicycles suggested a less modern past; today, their disappearance is substituted by a positive discourse of economic development and, subsequently, a positive discourse of urban development. The appearance of “three million cars” strengthened the image of a mobile future in sight. This was, however, in conflict with the environmental concerns mentioned in “the Green Olympics” or the vision of “a livable city,” and, needless to say, the endless complaints of traffic congestion in the city.
In the planned development of public transport, the expansion project of the Beijing Subway occupied a key place. Subway line 10, tailor-made to cater for the Olympics, was opened on July 19, 2008. Its significance was revealed by its place in Beijing maps: All the maps published in the period around the Olympics had a Beijing Subway map (see, for example, figure 6.2 and 6.7). In some maps (figure 6.2), “subway line in construction” was also marked, with clear indication on the map’s legend. The construction projects of the Beijing Subway were often mapped onto the city’s plans: “By 2010, the length of the Beijing subway will be extended to more than 300 km; by 2020, there will be 19 subway and light-rail lines in Beijing, with a total length of about 660 km” (Olympic City: 121). In foreseeing the future development, images like figure 6.11 were used to help one visualize plans; in Abbas’ words, “the more abstract and ungraspable space becomes, the greater the importance of the image” (1997: 69). The graphic image illustrating the expansion plan of the subway demonstrated a ceaseless determination, technological advancement, well-thought-out plan, and above all, progress.
CONCLUSION

This chapter shows how the state government seized the Olympic moment to imagine and to represent a Beijing that shaped a collective memory of the city, China, and Chineseness. The making of “New Beijing” displayed both the politics of reappearance and the politics of disappearance. Comparable to Abbas’ analysis of Shanghai (2000), the construction of a “New Beijing” showed a culture of reappearance, a reappearance that was driven by China’s ambition to make its presence in the global arena. This reappearance echoed the popular discourse of China’s great rejuvenation, which was circulated widely in the period around the Games. As I have argued earlier, the slogan “New Beijing, New Olympics” reflected China’s long-term pursuit to make progress and to be in the same league as the West which was presumably more developed. The reappearance of a “New Beijing” in the global arena required the remaking and the imagination of the past, the present, and the future. The past, in the example of Qianmen, reappeared to fill up people’s imagination of the good old days. Its reappearance was made possible by the disappearance of the old social fabric (hutongs and the social lives that revolved around the area).

Disappearance is usually perceived as a threat; however, Abbas’ concept of disappearance (1997) illuminates a new way of looking at disappearance — it has a productive aspect. Paralleling the booming interest in discussing cultural identity in (post-)colonial Hong Kong, the disappearance of the old hutongs in Qianmen has generated a thriving interest in the discussion of urban transformation, demolition, and preservation in Beijing. Examples include Ou Ning’s (欧宁) documentary Meishi Street, academic studies on urban changes, countless reports on demolition in journalism, and the many who carried their SLR cameras to capture the Beijing in disappearing. Theirs were attempts to write on the would-be-forgotten, and yet, precisely because of their actions, the disappearing reappeared in another social space. Another way of looking at the politics of disappearance, yet with much contestation, is that this preservation also made the creation of a new image, a new identity possible — in this case of an officially initiated project of place-making. It was a modern yet traditional Chinese identity that tried to shake off the outdated and shabby image of the past.

Likewise, the cosmopolitan image presented by the Bird’s Nest appeared to displace the negative and contested image of China revolving around the 2008 Games. This positive image — through the image of openness and happiness associated with the
Olympic Green — was made possible by the displacement of relatively less celebratory “facts” of, for example, migrant workers and the stringent security measures. In following Abbas’ argument on disappearance and forgetting, these less pleasant facts were not quite forgotten but people “remembered something as something else” (2012, forthcoming). In this light, the government deployed this tactic of disappearance in a very timely manner. After the Olympics, images of the migrant workers were installed inside the Bird’s Nest to honor their contribution in this Olympic project. Again, it showed that the migrant workers did not quite “disappear” but they were made invisible to make room for a pleasant cosmopolitan image of the present. The same can also be applied to the future plan of the city of Beijing — what mattered was not about what it would become but what it appeared to become. A promising future was visualized through misrecognition — a displacement of narratives.

Two years after the 2008 Games, another mega-event — the Shanghai Exposition 2010 (Expo) — took place in Beijing’s rival city, Shanghai. Both displayed China’s ambition to showcase its recent economic achievement to the world. Like the Beijing Games, the preparation for the Expo involved a massive scale of urban transformation, which involved demolition and relocation of local residents and industries in the chosen site. An area of 5.28 square km around the Huangpu River was dedicated to this 6-month event; numerous infrastructures (e.g. subway lines) were put in place. With a gathering of almost two hundred different countries and fifty corporate organizations, the Expo site displayed a strikingly similar cosmopolitan image as presented by the Olympic Green. This cosmopolitanism would be an image the government would like to present to its citizens and the world about today’s China. With the theme slogan — “Better City Better Life” — the Expo spelled out the national vision of “the future.” It would be a future made possible by technology and meticulous planning and it would easily be translated into modernity and progress, also demonstrated by the Beijing case.

Despite these similarities, the two mega-events and the two cities were not quite the same. In terms of global appeal, the Olympics seemed to draw more international attention than the Expo. The majority who visited the Expo were Chinese from China; of relevance, the Expo hardly received any global contestations. In terms of the city’s status, Shanghai is perceived as the financial center whereas Beijing is the cultural and political center. As a

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result, the roles assigned to them were different. In terms of city development, preservation projects in Shanghai (e.g. *Yuyuan* [豫园]) had taken place long before the Expo. Besides, a remarkable difference appeared in the way how the two cities dealt with the issue of demolition. During the Olympics, the Beijing government chose to make it disappear; yet, the Shanghai government made deliberate efforts that the demolished neighborhoods reappeared. For instance, a theater show performed by three hundred former residents, called “Homeland, Impression Shangsteel” (家园·印象上钢),\(^{178}\) was staged in the Expo and efforts were made to show how preservation projects were carried out (e.g. how old factories were restored for exhibitions). Viewed in this light, the Shanghai government seemed to have learned from Beijing’s mistake of avoiding turning demolition into a public issue. Research about urban transformation in Shanghai precedes Beijing (Abbas 2000; Olds 1997). The Expo undoubtedly furthered Shanghai’s ongoing plan of reappearance, yet in what ways it helped further the city’s ambition deserves a detailed analysis on its own. Two mega-events in two major cities in China — one cannot help but ask: How do other cities in China (e.g. Shenzhen) rival with these leading cities?\(^ {179}\) This topic itself merits a wider and deeper study.

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\(^{178}\) I thank Lena Scheen for suggesting this example. “Homeland, Impression Shangsteel” was a theater play performed during the Shanghai Expo, in July 2010 at Shanghai East Community Theater (东视剧场). The Shangsteel community was located in Pudong New Area (浦东新区), the name was derived from the steel factory located there before. Because of the Expo, six thousand residents were relocated. This play narrated the development stories of this place, from the nineteenth-century fishing village, to the proletarian community during the communist period, to today’s relocation for the Expo. The play was said to have captured the development of Shanghai and to live up to the Expo theme slogan “Better City, Better Life.”

\(^{179}\) The development of Chinese cities have become topics of interests; for instance, an independent and multidisciplinary think tank in the Netherlands have conducted a research called “Go West Project” to study the development of these emerging Chinese cities.