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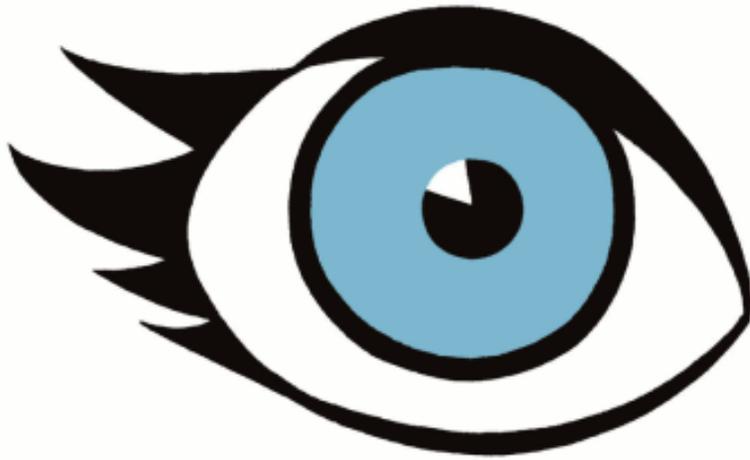
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Flaming a debate

On the multiple meanings of the Olympic torch relay spectacle
door [Wei Liu](#) en [Jeroen de Kloet](#)

'But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to the essence ... illusion only is sacred, truth profane. Nay, sacredness is held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness.'

Feuerbach, Preface to the second edition of *The Essence of Christianity* (quoted in Debord, 1967)

Cosmopolitan Dreams

At the origin of the modern Olympics, Pierre de Coubertin, the French father of the modern Olympic movement, envisioned an athletic forum to bring the world's nations together for a peaceful and harmonious expression of friendship and unity. Similar fantasies were voiced with the introduction of radio and, later, television. Unfortunately, history tells a different story, the twentieth century proved to be an exceptionally violent one, during which wars and revolutions undermined any longing for harmony. But the dreams remain in place, the Beijing Olympics' slogan 'One World One Dream' once again articulated the longing for harmony and peace.

[Wikipedia](#)

[China Central Television](#)

[CNN](#)

[Ludwig Feuerbach](#)

[Olympische Zomerspelen](#)

[Peking](#)

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Yet, in a time of lost innocence, the slogan also begs the question: Whose dream? And what world?

The Beijing Olympic Games were above all a media spectacle. While 10,000 athletes participated in the Games, approximately 30,000 journalists joined them to report on their efforts. It seems that the world is particularly fascinated by the Beijing Games; the spectacle is haunted by questions related to human rights, pollution, democracy and Tibet. For China, the Games came at a historical juncture at which they wanted to prove to be a capable upcoming world power. In order not to lose face, billions had been invested in spectacular architectures and massive urban regeneration schemes, involving the relocation of approximately 300.000 residents. The financial figures are quite staggering, as the Canadian urban studies scholar Broudehoux writes, 'the 2008 Games would be the most lavish ever staged, with investments of almost US\$40 billion: three times what Athens spent, and more than all the Summer Games since 1984 combined.' (Broudehoux, 2007, p. 384)

With so much at stake for the Chinese authorities, each detail of the Games had to become successful, testifying to the prosperity and glory of the nation. The kick-off for this spectacle consisted of the torch relay, which crossed the globe to arrive early May in China and embark on a tour that encompassed nearly every corner of the nation-state. The torch was meant to symbolize peace and harmony, it was supposed to lighten up the world on its route and spread the Olympic dream while simultaneously celebrating Chinese culture. But, as we have learnt from philosophers like Baudrillard, meanings are never fixed, the bond between the sign and the signifier is eroded at best. For him, signs do not refer to a reality anymore; instead, signs make up what we consider to be a reality. The torch relay seems to confirm Baudrillard's insight. Starting as a symbol of harmony, the torch became during its tour in London and Paris a symbol of protest for the Tibet movement, and when it returned in the Mainland, it became a symbol of hope after a severe earthquake hit China. Global media played a pivotal role in this spectacle, generating

different and highly contested meanings for a singular sign - the torch.

What the torch relay shows is how media spectacles are never fully under the control of one singular party, but always involve a struggle over meaning. New media technologies enable citizens to participate in that struggle on a more immediate and more global level than ever before. To get a glimpse of this contestation over meaning, we will examine two television news reports on the Beijing Olympics torch relay in Paris on April 7: the news reports are from CNN (the U.S.) and CCTV (China), and the subsequent heated debates on the Chinese Internet. As we will show, each of them reflects upon the torch relay with different concerns and rhetorics.

French Encounters

The CCTV's report on the Paris torch relay was aired at the prime-time news program. Half of the report informed the audience that the Paris torch relay was successful, which set the tone for the entire news piece. The anchorwoman started by introducing the first torch-bearer and the route of the relay. The screen showed torch-bearers running with smiling faces and the spectators cheering on the street. The anchorwoman said:

'During the relay, the Olympic torch received enthusiasm from the French people. Many French people were cheering "good luck Beijing, good luck the Beijing Olympics".' (Original script in Chinese, translation ours)

This 'warm enthusiasm' through the torch relay was reinforced when the TV showed that the last runner finished the relay in the sports stadium, where people were celebrating the success of the relay. The anchorwoman said:

'The Beijing Olympic Committee officers, together with officials from the Paris city hall, and the IOC, and the spectators in the stadium, witnessed the exciting moment when the fire was lit up in the stadium.'

Then she quoted an officer from the French Olympic Committee saying:

'The international Olympic torch relay helps to spread peace and other Olympic values. We welcome the arrival of the torch in Paris. This is a special moment.'

Only after all these celebratory accounts of the torch relay did the report switch to the conflicts between police and pro-Tibet protesters. The anchorwoman said:

'The torch relay in Paris was interrupted by *a handful of* Tibetan separatists ... The disruptions were all *timely* stopped and controlled by the police. According to the police, at least 5 people have been arrested for interrupting the torch relay. The torch relay was safely concluded with the warm welcome by the French people.' (Italics added for emphasis)

Although protesters in the Paris torch relay also included human rights activists who protested against the human rights violations in China, they were not addressed in the report. The report on the protests was followed by quotes from Henri Serandour, head of the French Olympic Committee, and Jin Jing, the Chinese torch-bearer in the wheel chair, and interviews with French and Chinese spectators on the street, who criticized the disruptions of the torch relay and asked for the separation of sports and politics.

CCTV's report on the Paris torch relay informed the audience that despite the disruptions of *a handful of* Tibetan separatists the torch relay was successful, and that the torch relay was welcomed by the Paris people, including the French Olympic Committee officials, city officials and the spectators. The techniques of what we term 'muting' (silencing or tuning down parts of the events) and 'amplifying' (zooming in on parts of the events) were used in this three minutes report. First, when the TV showed the cheering crowds, the background cheerful claps and whistles were also conveyed to the audience. In addition, the anchorwoman even pointed out what the spectators were cheering – 'good luck

Beijing, good luck the Beijing Olympics'. However, when the TV showed the conflicts between protesters and the police, and the retreat of the torch to a bus, the background sounds were dubbed over by the anchorwoman's voice.

In a clip released by the CNN (without any comment), the audience could hear clearly that the protesters were chanting 'Tibet, Tibet, Tibet'. The muting and amplifying in the CCTV report emphasized the insignificance of the 'handful of' protests, and the enthusiasm of the spectators in Paris in receiving the torch relay, and thus, in turn, the success of the torch relay. This was reinforced when the CCTV interviewed individuals who were in disfavor of the protests, whereas the voices from the protesting groups were silenced. They were simply labeled as 'Tibetan separatists', whose evil intentions and actions do not require further explanation. Moreover, the report also muted 'China' in the report. The word 'China' only appeared twice, both during quotes. The first one was heard at the end of an interview with a French speaking spectator, who said 'bravo la Chine'. The other one was at the end of the report when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China (MFAC) spokesperson Jiang Yu was quoted. Instead, the report emphasized the *Olympic values* embedded in the torch relay. In doing so, the report distanced itself from a clearly nationalist strategy and instead implicated the whole world in the story, thereby skillfully circumventing any discussion on national sovereignty.

Consequently, the protesters were positioned as the enemy of Olympic values. At the end of the report, the MFAC spokesperson proclaimed: 'We strongly criticize those Tibetan separatists, who disregard the Olympic spirits and French and Chinese laws, and tried to sabotage the Olympic torch relay'. Despite the protests, the torch relay in Paris concluded successfully, according to CCTV's report. Chinese audiences could witness the enthusiastic reception of the torch by not only the Chinese communities in Paris, but also the local French people, who were waving Chinese flags while saying 'bravo la Chine'.

[American readings](#)

CNN's coverage presented quite a different picture of the Paris torch relay, it focused predominantly on the protesting groups and their conflicts with the local police during the torch relay. For example, in one report about the Paris torch relay, CNN's anchorwoman said:

'Thousands of people wave Tibetan flags and shout anti-China slogans, protest the Olympic torch relay as the flame made its way around the world for the Summer Games in Beijing. One man tried to snap the torch out of a runner's hand in London. In Paris the torch was snucked out several times.'

In the opening remark of another CNN report, the anchorwoman Christie Lu Stout said:

'Images we see on our TV screen are very different from the images been seen in China itself. They are getting a very different idea of the torch's reception.'

Stout was waving her head while finishing this sentence. Then she introduced another CNN journalist Eunice Yoon in Beijing to have live conversation with her. The image now switched to Eunice Yoon. What the audience saw on the TV was a female journalist with an Asian background standing against a smoggy Beijing city landscape, holding a Chinese newspaper while looking back and forth from the paper and the camera:

'Well, they have been reported this morning, for example, in this state-run newspaper, where the headline reads that France has not been doing enough to protect the Olympic flame. There is a picture here showcasing angry Chinese people, behind them it is a Chinese flag, and they are yelling at protesters, who they believe as sabotaging the Olympic torch relay. *And really that has been the focus of the coverage here in China, both in the newspapers as well as on TV. The focus has been on the protesters, and the disruptions of the torch relay, and how that is really undermining*

what they believe should be a momentous occasion for China. There isn't a whole of coverage on why these protesters are acting out so aggressively. There is no mention of China's human rights record, which really has been, *of course*, the focus in the western media.'

When Stout asked Yoon about whether there was any reflection in China on why protesters were acting so angry, Yoon responded by describing the angers among Chinese nurtured by the Chinese media:

'For the most part, there is quite an amount of anger among Chinese. We've been checking out the blogs. Really most people have been quite patriotic. I guess it doesn't really come as too much of a surprise, given the fact that the television coverage as well as the coverage in the paper really has been slated towards the government policy ...'

Meanwhile, the screen started showing images of Chinese waving Chinese flags during the Paris torch relay, some of whom might have been living in Paris for a long time and not influenced by the 'pro-government' Chinese media that Yoon described. According to Yoon, these patriotic outbreaks among Chinese were a direct result of the Chinese media. At the ending remark, Yoon said:

'The protests overseas have sparked a *very rare* political debate in the Olympic movement.'

In CNN's report, the Paris torch relay was not anywhere close to 'success' as what the CCTV described. Instead, it was characterized as protests and conflicts, which have been 'very rare' in the Olympic movement. The choice of wordings showcases the significant controversies over China's hosting of the Summer Olympic Games. However, when we skim through the Olympic history, the Olympic movement has been full of political debates and controversies, the 1936 Berlin Olympics, the 1976 Montreal Olympics when African and Arabian countries protested against New

Zealand's participation, the 1980 Moscow Olympics which part of the West boycotted, and the following Los Angeles Summer Olympics from which the Eastern bloc pulled out are just a few examples.

Whereas CCTV's report on the Paris torch relay stayed in the French capital, CNN moved the reporting locality to Beijing, which was shown on TV as a smoggy city in the background. Together with the narratives on the political protests against the Beijing Olympics, the air pollution in Beijing shown on the screen conveyed to audiences that Beijing was not the best city to hold the Olympics. The choice of reporting site, as well as the 'Asian' reporter, on issues concerning the Beijing Olympics sought to add credibility to the news report. Even when the screen showed the pro-China groups during the Paris torch relay, the image of Yoon in Beijing did not disappear. Instead, it shrank to a smaller square floating on the top right corner of the main screen, while Yoon was explaining that the patriotic behaviors among the Chinese people was due to the 'incomplete and inaccurate' media coverage in China. Through this way of reporting, Beijing was constructed to be the source of all protests, due to its bad track record on human rights, protests emerged, due to the media coverage in China, fierce and alarming patriotic sentiments were stirred up.

Chinese Responses

Through blogs and discussion boards, patriotic sentiments indeed emerged in China, resulting in the use of an 'I Love China' logo for MSN messenger, and the call for a boycott of the French store Carrefour. T-shirts emerged with patriotic texts. Following a negative report on CNN, in which reporter Jack Cafferty called Chinese 'goons and thugs', an anti CNN website was opened in China (<http://www.anti-cnn.com>) and street protests were organised worldwide in which Chinese expressed their support for the Games and critiqued Western media. One of the more absurd examples of our media saturated world we observed in China was a newspaper heading that referred to how Western media criticize Chinese media for critiquing

Western media coverage of the torch relay. Reality more and more evaporates, what remains are the mediated signs, that refer to each other in an endless loop and hence amplify each other.

Fortunately, also within China, these patriotic outbursts received strong critique, prolific bloggers like Wang Xiaofeng ridiculed the protesters; for him it was like going back to Mao's time. He wrote in his blog: 'If there is anything that I should boycott, I only boycott stupid things.' Yet, at the same time, he is highly critical of Western media coverage, he rightly observes that 'Western journalists always hope that the Chinese people they interview can touch upon sensitive issues and give sensational remarks. They will do their best to interview dissidents.'

Back to the flame. What we can observe is that French philosopher Guy Debord's society of the spectacle has become a profoundly globalized one, a simple flame propels a struggle over meaning. To grasp the flame from a runner is believed to help 'free' Tibet. In this symbolic spectacle, media increasingly refer to each other, inspiring people to march to protest against an assumed biased media coverage. All we are left with, it seems, is mediation. As Debord writes, 'everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.' In particular the Beijing Games turn reality into a dramatic 'orchestration of discourses,' (Sohat and Stam, 1995) in which multiple parties try to participate.

To conclude, the idea of 'One World, One Dream' has become almost a shadow of itself. The spectacular proliferation of an antagonistic discourse in which the alleged 'West' and 'China' are framed as each others' opposites, in which both media and people withdraw into cultural fortresses, undermines the potential the Olympics hold for a more cosmopolitan worldview in which cultural differences are at most arbitrary and temporary. The flame changed meaning again after its return to Mainland China. Since the earthquake in Sichuan on March 14, 2008, the flame has become a symbol of hope and strength, a symbol that is believed to help the

Chinese nation to recover, to survive. Earlier meanings of protest and of a Western sanctioned fight for Tibet independence have seemingly evaporated. In particular the speed with which the meaning has slipped once again, the ease with which earlier meanings are erased or forgotten, indicates how in our current globalized world, 'reality' – that mediated theatre of signs – is increasingly in flux, has become more and more unstable, shadowy and difficult to grasp, perhaps not unlike like the flame itself.

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