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# The Myth of the City Image in Contemporary Chinese Society

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# **The Myth of the City Image in Contemporary Chinese Society**

by

Tingting Zhang

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through Communication and Social Justice  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts at the  
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2013

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# **The Myth of the City Image in Contemporary Chinese Society**

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### AUTHOR'S DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

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## ABSTRACT

In the past three decades, China's cities have experienced rapid urbanization in a transitional political and economic environment; correspondingly, the city image has become one of the most important symbols of the progress in Chinese development. Within the Chinese mainstream media, the transformation of the city image has long been heralded as a successful microcosm of Chinese political and economic reforms. However, the social reality behind the prosperous facade of the city's image is that city leaders are reshaping urban spaces to cater to the needs of the dominant class, multinational corporations, and global capitalism. Moreover, the construction of the city's image obfuscates the widening gap between rich and poor, class conflicts, and the reconstitution of capitalist class power.

I hypothesize that the idea of the contemporary city image is a myth, and intend to reveal the meanings and connotations which the myth conceals. More specifically, I conduct a case study of the 2008 Beijing Olympic campaign by comparing the representation of the city image offered by mainstream and alternative media sources. I examine how the mainstream media helped to construct the myth in accordance with government directives and how it was contested within the alternative media. In this way, I explore the power relations and class struggle behind the myth from a social justice perspective.

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## INTRODUCTION

Any tourist who has travelled to China in the last twenty years will be amazed at the tremendous changes in China's cities which have been transformed from gray, dull, and isolated places to prosperous, luxurious, and global mega-cities. Undoubtedly, in the past three decades, China's cities have experienced rapid urbanization in a transitional political and economic environment; correspondingly, the city image has become one of the most important symbols in the progress of Chinese development. The policy of "image design," which was initiated by the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, and further developed by his successor Jiang Zemin (*Xinhua News*, 2009), emphasizes the importance of the city image in the ideological field. Thus, the transformation of the city image has long been heralded as a representational microcosm of political and economic reforms by the Chinese mainstream media. Simultaneously, on a global scale, increasing competition between cities has become a catalyst for urban regeneration and renewal. Within such a political and economic environment, cultivating a modern and world-class city image has become an urgent mission for local governments, city leaders, and mainstream media. More precisely, the more a city appears on the world stage, the more its civic elites have a chance to sell the city and attract flows of global capital and international investment. Thus, we saw the Olympic Games become a key arena for displaying and selling the new city image to the world audience. In China, the trend toward urban "image design" arguably reached its apex when the Beijing government initiated its bid to host the 2008 Olympics.

However, behind the prosperous facade of the city's images was the other, often unseen, side of Chinese urbanization. In China, large-scale demolitions were portrayed as

“image construction projects” by the mainstream media. For the Beijing Olympic Games, in order to achieve the goal of urban reconstruction, the demolition across the whole city threatened the old *Hutong* and *Siheyuan* areas, and nine million square meters of dilapidated housing was replaced by new houses and new venues (Anonymous, 2008). Behind this grand dream of an internationalized Olympic metropolis, from 1991 to 2003, about 1.5 million people were relocated from core city areas out to the blocks in the suburbs (USA Today, 2007). Also, about one million rural migrant workers, illegally and without residency rights, were working on the Olympic construction sites (York, 2008). On the surface, Olympic urban reconstruction projects can change the city image, attract investment and tourism, and promote economic development. However, one could argue that as a result of this Chinese urban phenomenon, city leaders are reshaping the city image to cater to the needs of the dominant class, multinational corporations, and global capitalism. Manuel Castells (1978) argues that “the dominant classes posed ‘the urban question’ at the forefront of the political scene, in an attempt to substitute the contradiction between labor and capital with the problems of the quality of life” (p. 173). In this sense, strategies of cultivating a city image are symbolic and ideological in nature. Moreover, the changing “official” city image promoted by the media and the government concealed many social realities including the influx of rural migrants, the increase of slums and shantytowns, and the reconstitution of capitalist class power.

My thesis, at a fundamental level, is an investigation of the contradiction between the symbolic phenomenon presented by the official city image and a social reality marked by unequal city struggles. I hypothesize that the city’s image represented by the mainstream media is a utopian myth. Thus, my central research question is “what is the

nature of the myth of the city images in China?” Also, several related issues will be investigated in my research, including how the myth is created, the political and economic context in which it is constructed, and how it is represented in symbolic and material terms. To better understand the nature of the myth, I conducted a case study of the 2008 Beijing Olympic campaign, which was designed by the Beijing government and promoted by the Chinese mainstream media to sell a particular version of the city to the world audience.

I specifically chose the Beijing Olympic campaign since the city of Beijing is the capital and political centre of the nation. Moreover, I believe that the city image in Chinese contemporary society fosters the same urban myth, although different Chinese cities possess different features and histories. From imperial capital<sup>1</sup> to Olympic city, the evolution of Beijing’s image largely represents the transformation of the nation. Especially during the 2008 Olympics, Beijing was placed in the spotlight by international media and represented China to the world. This case study details the representation of the city image during the 2008 Olympics. In particular, I compare an official film *Charming Beijing*, which was produced by the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad (BOCOG), with an alternative documentary *Meishi Street*, which was produced by independent director Ou Ning. *Charming Beijing* was used in the Beijing Olympic branding campaign and introduced a striking and attractive city image to foreign tourists, international investors, and the International Olympic Committee (IOC). On the official website of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, *Charming Beijing* is described as a portrayal that “presents the city’s age-old culture, modern vitality,

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<sup>1</sup> Beijing emerged as China’s capital from the Yuan Dynasty, and before 1949, Beijing was a capital of the feudal society.

enthusiastic residents and steady steps towards the Olympic Games in 2008” (BOCOG, n. d.). To some degree, all of the elements in this film symbolize and represent core political propaganda and Olympic ideology. In contrast, an alternative documentary, *Meishi Street* showed ordinary Chinese citizens taking a stand against the planned destruction of their homes in preparation for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. As a typical slum area in the centre of Beijing, Meishi Street was slotted to be “reorganized; the original residents living along the street faced the demolition of their homes and relocation to other areas of the city. They were not satisfied with the compensation plan offered by the government and developers and started on a journey to protect their rights. By comparing these two films, I argue that the city of Beijing became a site of contestation where the entwists of multinational companies, the state, and urban and local forces converged and collided. Likewise, Beijing’s image, as a kind of constructed culture, is deeply articulated into the contradictory Chinese media system, and the broader political and economic environment which is often referred to as “socialism with Chinese characteristics.”

Stuart Hall states that “meaning is always the result of an act of ‘articulation’... it is always expressed in a specific context, a specific historical moment, within a specific discourse” (Hall cited in Storey, 1998, p. xii). China is a Communist Party dominated and controlled country, and the official city images, produced by the government and propagandized within state controlled media contributes to the myth that Chinese cities are catching up with western cities, and the new city images represent the progress and development of China. Roland Barthes (1972) believed that myth is a signifying practice embedded in ideological society. Therefore, the aim of my thesis is to challenge the “innocence” and “naturalness” of the constructed images, and attempt to reveal the real

meanings and connotations that the myth conceals. In particular, I attempt to debunk the myth of the city image of Beijing by analyzing how it was represented during the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

More importantly, the city image problems are relevant to the principle of social justice. David Harvey (2009) points out that the nature of space has remained something mysterious to social enquiry. Therefore, spatial forms are seen not as inanimate objects within which the social process unfolds, but as things which “contain” social processes in the same manner that social processes are spatial. Castells (1977) also insists that cities have to be examined as the historical manifestations of power and production in capitalism. From a critical perspective, one could argue that the official city image serves hegemonic ideology, and likewise, the dominant ideology uses the fabricated images and the processes of representation to conceal social inequalities. Considering the Chinese political, economic and cultural context, as a mirror of social changes, the changing city image reflects Chinese political and economic reforms, and the deeper social conflicts and class struggles in contemporary Chinese society.

## CHAPTER ONE: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The purpose of this research is to demystify the mythology embodied in the official city image of Beijing, particularly the images that were represented in the film *Charming Beijing*. I intended to critically investigate and compare the official images with those from the film *Meishi Street* which were produced by alternative media. In doing so, I employed critical cultural studies as a theoretical framework, and several core concepts such as culture, representation, myth and ideology were used in my analysis.

### *1.1 Cultural Studies*

As an interdisciplinary field, Cultural Studies includes a wide range of approaches and draws from multiple disciplinary roots such as literature, sociology, communication, anthropology, linguistics, and various forms of semiology. Also, it encompasses many different theoretical and political positions from Marxism, Structuralism, Post-structuralism, to Feminism and Postmodernism. Cultural Studies, therefore, represents a complex field of inquiry and its subject matter is wide-ranging. James Carey states that Cultural Studies attempts to think about the mass media, not in relation to this or that isolated problem (violence, pornography, children), or institution (politics, economy, family), or practice (film production, conversation, advertising), but as elements; in Raymond Williams' phrase, "in a whole way of life" (Carey cited in Miller, 2002, p. 76).

Early Cultural Studies was closely tied to what has been called "culturalism." Hall (1980) points out that all the works of culturalism "implied a radical break with previous conceptualization, they inflected the term 'culture' away from its traditional



moorings....moving the argument into the wider field of social practices and historical processes” (p. 20). Then Cultural Studies experienced a shift from the culturalist paradigm to a structuralist paradigm. Scholars of Cultural Studies came to focus on the “interplay of representations and ideologies of class, gender, race, ethnicity and nationality in cultural texts” (Kellner, n. d., p. 4). Generally, for culturalism, culture is related to social practice and lived experience; for structuralism, the idea of culture refers to shared meanings and symbolic and ideological goods. In this sense, Cultural Studies is not simply the study of culture; instead, its objective is to understand culture in all its complex forms and to analyze the social and political context. As a constructed cultural phenomenon, the city image is the sign of social representation threading throughout the complex and contradictory Chinese society. Therefore, a critical analysis was developed in my thesis between lived realities (local people’s real lives), and a contextual investigation of historical, social, and political structures of power.

Structuralism’s interventions and consequent developments largely articulated culture around the concept of ‘ideology’. Barthes understood ideology as a body of ideas and practices which define the status quo and actively promote the values and interests of the dominant groups in society (Barthes cited in Storey, 1993, p. 78) Hall contends that the field of culture is “a major site of ideological struggle, a terrain of ‘incorporation’ and ‘resistance,’ one of the sites where hegemony is to be won or lost” (Hall cited in Storey, 1998, p. xiii). In many ways, Barthe’s theories of “myth” paved the way for subsequent investigations of ideology by cultural studies scholars. Castells (1996) argues that people construct new identities and social movements that could challenge the elusive and elitist tendencies. Therefore, I employed an integrative theoretical framework which situates the

texts of the Chinese city image within the broader context of social movements marked by ideological struggles.

### *1.2 Defining Myth*

The vital concept of “myth,” on a fundamental level, is about seeing “how representation is working at a broader cultural level (Hall, 1997[a], p.39). Lévi-Strauss (1977) believes that myths provide a model of thought capable of overcoming contradictions by modifying and masking them so as to minimize their cultural impact. Barthes (1972) contended that the myth “is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a second-order semiological system” (p. 114).

In his book *Mythologies*, Barthes (1972) exposes how images are often used to impose values upon people by examining various manifestations of mass culture such as films, advertisement, newspapers, magazines, and photographs. For Barthes, everything can be transformed by cultural connotations into myth; thus, myth is a signifying practice embedded in ideological society. Thus, in order to debunk myths, researchers should challenge the “innocence” and “naturalness” of cultural texts and practices in order to reveal the meanings and connotations that the myth conceals.

According to Barthes (1972), myth functions as two semiological systems: one is a linguistic system, and it is the language which myth gets hold of in order to build its own system; the other is a meta-language system, a second language in which one speaks about the first. Based on this point, the myth of the city image involves two separate but linked processes. In the first, the geographic elements of city images reinforce the landscape and the history of cities; in the second, the representation of the city image is

linked to a broader and ideological context. At the second level, the myth refers to icons and stereotypes of the city image which are related to a dominant/ hegemonic ideology. Thus, it is my aim to explore the process of meaning construction and characters, and social power which are embedded in the city image. By comparing the two aforementioned films, I attempted to illustrate how the city image portrayed in them involves different meanings of social reality.

### *1.3 Media Representation*

The common-sense notion of the representation is “using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people” (Hall, 1997[a], p. 15). According to Hall, representation “is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture;” it inevitably involves “the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things” (Hall, 1997[a], p. 15). In other words, representation connects meaning and language to culture.

Fundamentally, languages are “system of representation.” Here, the sphere of languages is extensive including signs, symbols, figures, images, words, and sounds; especially, visual signs and images. Hall notes that these visual images, “even when they bear a close resemblance to the things to which they refer, are still signs: they carry meaning and thus have to be interpreted” (1997[a], p. 19). For Culture Studies, the crucial point is to explore how representation of meaning through language works. Hall discusses three approaches to representation: the reflective approach, the intentional approach, and a constructionist approach. He argues, however, that the most useful is a constructionist approach in which representation “is conceived as entering into the very

constitution of things; and thus culture is conceptualized as ‘constitutive,’ as important as the economic or material ‘base’ in shaping social subjects and historical events- not merely a reflection of the world after the event” (Hall, 1997[b], p. 6). In this sense, representation concentrates on how the world is socially constructed and represented to and by people in meaningful ways.

The city image can be conceived as a field of representation. Duncan and Ley (1993) read the landscape as a text and examine the works of Barthes, Derrida, Ricouer, and Foucault to investigate the relations of power and ideologies which are embedded in the city image. Gregory (1994) states that the city image can also be treated as “a product of the interpretations that others have placed on the urban and delivered to us through specific critical interpretations and through representation in the media and other contexts” (p. 140).

My investigation of the city image and how it was represented in the two films under analysis mainly incorporates Hall’s constructionist approach to representation which can be summarized as follows: in the constructionist perspective, representation involves making meaning by forging links between three different orders of things: “what we might broadly call the world of things, people, events and experiences; the conceptual world—the mental concepts we carry around in our heads; and the signs, arranged into languages, which ‘stand for’ or communicate these concepts” (Hall, 1997[a], p. 61). Taylor and Willis (1999) state that “no media representation can” offer access to the “truth” about what is being represented, but what such representations do provide is an indication about how power relations are organized in a society at certain historical moments” (p. 40). In this sense, the logic of representation often mystifies power

relationships by supporting dominant rather than subordinate (oppositional) discourse. Therefore, by analyzing the representation of an official film *Charming Beijing* and comparing it to *Meishi Street*, I explored how the city image of Beijing was constructed, represented and contested.

#### *1.4 Image and Ideology*

As a core concept in Cultural Studies, ideology is a complex term with multiple and even competing meanings. Graeme Turner (2003) calls it “the most important conceptual category in cultural studies” (p. 167) and Carey contends that “British cultural studies could be described just as easily and perhaps more accurately as ideological studies” (Carey cited in Storey, 1993, p. 3).

The concept of ideology in cultural studies opens a way for a more considered approach to media representation. In relation to the myth of the city image, Scott Greer (1962) believes that the changing city image is defined and modified not by geographical changes, but by social organizations. An organizational image of the city reflects the ongoing, everyday activities of citizens and a complex social structure which has constraining power over individuals. The dominant ideology in Chinese society uses the fabrication of the images and the processes of representation to persuade Chinese people that the contemporary city image reflects China’s modernization and development. During the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, the construction of Beijing as an Olympic city influenced and promoted China’s international image as a “harmonious society.” In my thesis, I focus attention on hegemonic representation; that is, how certain ideas and values were conveyed in *Charming Beijing* and how particular meanings were regularly constructed as “common sense” in keeping with formulations espoused by Antonio

Gramsci. While Gramsci noted that dominant groups often have more power and resources at their disposal to construct “common sense” or the “taken for granted,” he also emphasized that ideology is a site of struggle. He discusses how a hegemonic social order is always contested by counter-hegemonic forces; that is, hegemony is not maintained through the obliteration of the opposition but through the articulation of opposing interests (Gramsci cited in Turner, 2003, p. 178). This concept implies the resistance of the oppressed class and the possibilities of social change. In terms of the relationship between ideology and image, Nichols (1981) argues that “the interplay of codes constituting the image . . . forms an ideological arena and an arena for ideological contestation” (p.64). Thus, for the Beijing Olympic campaign, the official propaganda and the system of image representation constituted an ideological framework “ [in] which different classes and social groups deploy[ed] in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works” (Storey, 1998, p. xii). However, counter-hegemonic forces exist in the civil space. In my research I attempted to investigate the ideological struggle between the dominant class and subordinate class by analyzing *Meishi Street* which illustrates how the Beijing government used its power to redistribute public resources (while benefitting private interests) during a large-scale demolition project. The original citizens of the slum were asked to make sacrifices for this urban planning. They struggled for their rights and negotiated with the government. However, in the end, their properties were destroyed by force, but their struggles changed *Meishi Street*, a normal urban space, and gave it new meanings.

## CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

### *2.1 Image-based Research & Textual Analysis*

Contemporary image-based research has developed rapidly. Over the last three decades, qualitative researchers have begun to involve a wider range of visual media including film, video, cartoons, and so on. Prosser & Schwartz (1998) argue that photographic images can “show characteristic attributes of people, objects, and events that often elude even the most skilled wordsmiths” (p. 116).

Some scholars define image-based research as visual sociology, a field of qualitative sociology which records and analyzes social life through photographs. Lewis Hine was a pioneer of visual social science who focused his developing sociological lens on the social and economic disparities of the industrial city. The work of Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead (1942) in *Balinese Character* can be regarded as a landmark in the history of visual sociology. It provided a new perspective for integrating image and text, and also situated the visual ethnography method in a wide-ranging study of culture. Patrick Fuery and Kelli Fuery (2003) consider the intersection between image and culture by integrating visual culture and critical theory. They believe that visual cultural studies has become a key area for examining social issues through images, as critical theories can provide an effective way to analyze the meaning of images and situated them within the broader socio-political context.

For visual cultural studies, the approach of textual analysis develops from semiotics to structuralism and poststructuralism. The semiotics model examines how signs such as words and pictures come to mean and have meaning. Saussure and Barthes employ a semiotic approach to study how meaning occurs in language, image, and other forms of expression. In particular, Barthes developed the semiotic approach to systematically uncover the way in which structure generates meanings. Derived from the semiotics model, structuralism sees social reality as constructed largely by language. Thus, text becomes “real and decipherable through a set of institutionally generated codes, or interpretive frames” (Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994, p. 467), while poststructuralism sees text not as an object, but “an occasion for the interplay of multiple codes and perspectives” (Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994, p. 468) which is similar to what Hall referred to as a “discursive approach” (Hall, 1997[a], p.62). As Hall (1997[a]) summarized, there was much to learn from both approaches. In semiotics, scholars emphasize the importance of signifier / signified, language / parole and myth, and how the marking of difference and binary oppositions are crucial for meaning; in the discursive approach, scholars emphasize discursive formations, power/ knowledge and the idea of a regime of truth (p. 62).

Richard Dyer emphasizes that texts are not independent; rather texts are constructed within particular historical formations and influenced by existing hegemonic discourses. As such, he “broadens the idea of the text by acknowledging the importance of extra-textual material in the construction of any particular text’s meanings” (Dyer cited in Turner, 2003, p. 85). Similarly, Douglas Kellner (1997)



suggests that researchers should situate textual analyses within broader systems of production and distribution; the study of media texts can be articulated into the social structure. In this sense, an understanding of the political and economic context can help “determine the range of political and ideology discourses and effects, and help indicate which discourses are dominant at a specific conjuncture” (p. 107).

## 2.2 *Social Semiotics*

In many ways, Kellner’s approach is similar to that described by Mariana Valverde (2006), a proponent of social semiotics. Whereas more traditional approaches to semiotics tend to focus exclusively on the texts themselves, social semiotics considers texts within their broader context. Social semiotics involves identifying the constituent units in a semiotic system such as a text but also draws attention to structural relationships that can be used to explore “the social, culture, and political effects and meanings of various representations” (Valverde, 2006, p. 6).

In the case of visual representations of the city image, a social semiotics approach focuses on analyzing how visual signs and symbols work. Like languages, visual signs carry, produce and circulate social meanings, although they appear to be natural images of the real world. By analyzing two films in my research, I intend to show how *Charming Beijing* (an official short film produced by the government) is mystified as an “objective record” and how the government represented Beijing as an ideal place for citizens and tourists. In contrast, *Meishi Street*, an observational documentary, offers a certain vision of the people, a slice of real life that contradicts and contests the images presented in *Charming Beijing*. According to Warren

Buckland (1998), an observational documentary attempts to “persuade the spectator that the film is an accurate slice of life, [which] is a transparent record of what took place in front of the camera” (p. 110). The director, Ou Ning, handed the camera to ordinary people and encouraged them to record the process of demolition; thus, he is invisible in the film and did not intervene. Although Ou Ning does not present himself as a political film maker, many critical and ideological signs can be detected in this film. It is not simply a “record” of people reacting to the demolition of their homes; it also represents the forms which their resistance took in relation to the myth of the official city image.

Social semiotics models also involve context analysis. Valverde (2006) describes two dimensions: one is the context of production; the other is the context of reception or consumption. The context of production of the city image includes the analysis of historical processes and political forces such as local governors, city elites, and private developers. The context of the consumption of the city image also includes the resistance articulated by “ordinary” people. My analysis of the two aforementioned films investigates the relations of power and ideologies embedded in the city images which were examined in terms of the texts themselves and the broader contexts in which they emerged, including a consideration of the political, economic and historical processes that influenced the construction of these images.

## CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW

### *3.1 The City Image, the Social Construction of Meaning, and the Chinese Politico-Economic Context*

According to Bounds (2004), there are some key factors related to the city image, the mental map of places, environmental issues, cultural production, the tourist gaze, and public space. Trowbridge speculated that “people carried imaginary maps of areas with which they were familiar around in their heads” (Trowbridge cited in Bounds, 2004, p. 115). Lynch (1960) addresses the question of the city image from an environmental perspective. He believes that the city image is determined by five elements: paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks. In Lynch’s view, the understanding of the city image is determined not only by the quality of the built environment, but also by the mental maps of residents. As well he found that different classes can produce different city images.

Much of the extant literature examines the city image by focusing on its forms of cultural production. Burton Pike (1996) points out that the city image is a social one which represents the ideas and values of community. Raymond Williams (1973) argues that such images often masked the poverty and exploitation of rural workers. To some extent, the rural idyll was a representation of social power and its imposition on nature. Differing from the classic image-of-the-city studies, Joan Ramón Resina and Dieter Ingenschay (2003) coined the term “after-image” to situate the cities in a broad cultural context. In *After-Images of the City*, scholars provide several case studies of urban issues in cities including New York, Barcelona, Madrid, Paris, Tijuana, Berlin, and London. They attempt to explore a new way to analyze the

transition of city images which are portrayed, shaped, and communicated during the process of urbanization. Duncan and Ley (1993) deploy critical discourse to investigate the relations of power and ideologies that are embedded in the urban form. Generally, scholars believe that the city image itself is a product of culture and of social power which has been placed in the urban form and delivered to us through representation in the media and other contexts. In this view, it is necessary to consider the macro political and economic context when we investigate the myth of the city image in Chinese contemporary society. As Mosco (2005) contends, it is vital to question “why the myth exists, why it is so important to people, what it means, and what it tell us about people’s hopes and dreams” (p. 29).

In terms of the Chinese city image, its transformation has been closely related to the evolution of the Chinese politico-economic environment. Here, I am not attempting to outline a changing map of the Chinese political economy; rather my focus is on the transformation of the urban pattern, urban life, and symbolic components of urban image-making in the Chinese context. The People's Republic of China (P.R.C.) was proclaimed in 1949, and from then on China entered the era of Mao Zedong. There were two missions for the new government and the Communist party: “[f]irst, national administrative control had to be established and consolidated; second, a prostrate economy had to be revived” (Riskin, 1987, p. 38). In terms of the former, Chairman Mao developed Chinese Marxism and used it to build dominant power in government. For the latter, China adopted a heavy industry model under the urban planning system which simply copied Soviet practices regardless of their

appropriateness to Chinese conditions. Therefore, during the Maoist period, cities were transformed into sites of production rather than consumption. Large-scale industries, along with other state-operated institutions, were organized into generalized forms such as work-unit compounds (so called *Danwei*). Piper Rae Gaubatz (1995) describes the Maoist socialist cities,

“[T]he multifunctional compounds built by Chinese work units since 1949 are walled areas somewhat reminiscent of the walled wards of the early traditional Chinese city. ... The highly controlled environment of the work-unit compound is entered through a guarded gate. Within the gate, the architecture is utilitarian and regimented. Orderly rows of residential structures commonly consist of three- to five-story brick or cement buildings. Common areas between the buildings serve as bicycle parking lots, children's play areas, recreation places for volley ball and other sports, and green areas. .... Neighborhood committees sometimes also functioned as work-units. By organizing small production workshops and other neighborhood labor they limited the need for long-distance mobility within the city.” (pp. 29-32).

By 1960, a specific household registration (*Hukou*) system was instituted and used to identify the agricultural and non-agricultural resident. In fact, the *Danwei* and *Hukou* systems largely determined Chinese urbanization and class division.

Under Maoist ideology, the mainstream media functioned as an “ideological apparatus” (Althusser, 1998) and their main mission was to propagate the policies of the Communist Party. Mao commented that “[i]t’s no good if cities are too big”

(Naughton, 1995, p. 64). This anti-urbanism dominated the discourse of the time. Chinese media took Mao's doctrine as the guideline and communicated it to citizens. Millions of urban intellectuals were mobilized and moved to rural areas. And in 1978, "nearly half of youths were still in the countryside. Shanghai, in particular, had a zero population growth rate during most of the 1960s" (Naughton, 1995, p. 67). Generally, in the Mao era, the Chinese cities were surrounded with mass movements, political chaos, and economic crises, the city images thus were deeply articulated into the wider political and economic environments.

The political and economic changes in the Deng Xiaoping era fundamentally transformed urban patterns and city images. The year 1978 can be regarded as the most memorable transformational year in China's contemporary history. In that year, Deng Xiaoping took over control of the Communist Party and initiated a series of economic reforms which resulted in shifts from a planned economy to a more market-oriented economy; these eventually stimulated the rapid growth of Chinese urbanization over the next several decades. Under Deng's rule, China shifted its focus from class struggle toward economic development and strived to modernize agriculture, industry, national defense, science and technology. Harvey (2005) used "neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics" to unmask the term of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" coined by Deng Xiaoping. In Harvey's view, Chinese neoliberalism is "the construction of a particular kind of market economy that increasingly incorporates neoliberal elements inter-digitated with authoritarian centralized control" (p. 120). As well, Klein (2001) sharply points out that the

Chinese model of neoliberalism is a “free market combined with authoritarian political control, enforced by iron-fisted repression” (p.191). On the one hand, private companies “made greater use of the market and reduced reliance on administrative planning” (Riskin, 1987, p. 341). The development of township and village enterprises (TVEs) was gradually substituted with the dominant position of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in the Chinese economic paradigm; on the other hand, Deng emphasized authoritarian control in the ideological field. In essence, Deng’s policy of “reform and opening-up” rationalized capitalist neoliberal policy and established a capitalist city model.

Compared to generalized urban forms in the Maoist period, Deng’s urban pattern emphasized specialized districts. Five Special Economic Zones (SEZs) had been established between 1980 and 1984. According to Gaubatz (1995), “[s]pecialized urban forms consist of spatially distinct districts that tend toward functional specialization, such as residential districts, manufacturing areas, or tourist districts” (p. 34). On the whole, Deng’s policy sped up “the development of the coastal region, to put the emphasis on energy and raw materials construction in the central region, and to actively make preparations for the further development of the western region” (Yang, 1997, p. 29). SEZ cities, especially in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) have become China’s greatest contemporary urban phenomenon. As the fundamental force behind the urbanisation process, Deng’s economic policy spawned hundreds of new Chinese cities which ignited the real estate market and transformed the urban life of its people. Since 1998, new commodified private housing called

“*Xiaoqu*” (new commercial districts) for the masses has replaced Mao era’s work units. Correspondingly, mixed-residential *Xiaoqu* have produced isolated urban lives; residents in the same *Xiaoqu* do not know each other. Transformation also came to the ideological field. The mainstream media simultaneously shifted from a Soviet model to a capitalist model. They promoted government policies and linked the concept of openness and progress to the new city images. New urban construction initiatives were described as “image projects”<sup>2</sup>. Through the media’s publicity, temporary rural workers who could not obtain *Hukou* poured into cities and were hired by state-owned enterprises as contract workers. Those migrants formed a “floating population” and lived in “Village in the City.”<sup>3</sup> A new city class divide thus emerged between privileged urban residents and second-class floating citizens.

In the era of globalization, regional policies designed to cultivate new city images to attract foreign capital and foreign investments began to emerge. China’s cities saw the construction of skyscrapers, big shopping malls, highways, and flagship brand stores. The scale and speed of new urban China’s construction destroyed mature historical cities such as Beijing as the economic mode and rapid urbanization accelerated the transformation of the city image. The Chinese government emphasized “image design” which was initiated by Deng Xiaoping during the 1980s

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<sup>2</sup>Image projects, also called vanity projects, refer to local governors using their power to come up with costly, flashy and invalid urban construction projects. These projects are only to flaunt their political achievements regardless of the people’s needs and local realities. Some of them even undermine urban culture and local environments.

<sup>3</sup>Village in the city is a unique phenomenon during the process of the Chinese urbanization. It refers to local neighborhoods, located in the edge of cities, lags behind high-speed urban development, divorced from modern city management, and has a lower living standard.



and early 1990s, which was further developed by his successor Jiang Zemin (*Xinhua News*, 2009). More precisely, image design symbolized a new political strategy to integrate Chinese economic development into the global economy. Under this policy, creating a global world-class city image became an urgent mission for local governments, city leaders and the mass media since it was determined that only a globalized city image could attract the flows of global capital and international investments.

Generally speaking, the political and economic transformation deeply influenced the entire social system, shaped China's unbalanced regional developments and changed the city image and people's urban life. Cities such as Beijing and Shanghai evolved rapidly while others had near-zero growth. Further, this paradoxical urban model generated completely different city images within the same context. Behind the prosperous city image serious urban problems such as the influx of rural migrants and the increase of slums and shantytowns became evident. As Harvey (2005) states, "the reforms led to environmental degradation, social inequality, and eventually something that looks uncomfortably like the reconstitution of capitalist class power (p. 122).

### *3.2 The Changing Image of Beijing city*

Throughout its history, Beijing emerged as China's capital from the Yuan Dynasty (1271 - 1368), called *Dadu* (Great Capital), and the name of "Beijing" was applied to the city during the Ming Dynasty (1368 – 1644). From then on, as an

imperial capital, Beijing has symbolized China's political, economic and cultural strength; to some degree Beijing means China.

Beijing has evolved from an austere and drab production capital into a globalized metropolis during the last three decades. The Chinese government implemented policies first in Beijing, and then expanded them to the whole nation. Thus, the transformation of Beijing's image is a microcosm of the whole country. Under the Soviet model, Beijing was constructed as an industrial city full of steel mills, petrochemical plants and large-scale work units alongside the factories. Simultaneously, Tiananmen Square was constructed as a political icon of the new Beijing and a new socialist China. In contrast to the Forbidden City during the imperial period, Tiananmen Square was said to open up a space for ordinary people and the working classes. Beijing thus was called "the People's city."<sup>4</sup> Workers and soldiers were transferred to the capital; old *Hutong* dwellers and new immigrants constituted new Beijing residents, and coexisted in a new social and political reality. The lifestyle of *Hutong* residents more closely resembled that of the old days in Beijing, while new immigrants mostly lived in *Danwei* (state-owned administrative/employment units), and had relatively less privacy.

Beijing was transformed into a neoliberal city as Chinese economic reforms were undertaken. The reforms ushered in a new urban pattern that reshaped and reconstructed the city image and urban life styles. Helga Leitner et al. (2007) suggest that the neoliberal city is an entrepreneurial city, which

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<sup>4</sup> According to Wangjun, "people's city" was generated from many people's belief after 1949 in the planned economy.

“directs all its energies to achieving economic success, and it is a city in which municipal bureaucracies, dedicated to social missions, is progressively replaced by professionalized quasi-public agencies empowered and responsible for promoting economic development, privatizing urban services, and catalyzing competition among public agencies. Decisions are increasingly driven by cost-benefit calculations rather than missions of service, equity and social welfare.” (p. 4)

Beijing’s urban transformation was firmly embedded in the interrelated neoliberal process. The key shifts of the city were increasing small-scale private enterprise, transforming state-run companies, and opening international trade and investment. During Beijing’s neoliberal processes, the city government practically supported the growth of private businesses, accompanied with financial liberalization, deregulation, and decentralization. Some old city areas were sold to multinational companies for commercial development such as the iconic commercial centre, Oriental Plaza, and Qianmen areas. No matter how many complaints the Beijing government received, those city construction projects were approved by the State Council. In fact, bureaucratic capitalists and private entrepreneurs constituted the new dominant class in Beijing. As Harvey (2005) states, neoliberalism is designed to suit the needs of multinational corporations and the dominant classes regardless of the common interests. Under neoliberal policy, Beijing was no longer highlighted as an industrial city; rather Beijing was positioned as a modern consumption city. Consumer culture continued to spread to every corner of the city. Beijing boasts the

largest shopping mall in Asia (the Oriental Plaza), Western-style supermarkets, American fast food chains, and various luxury brand flagship stores. In particular, after Beijing won the bid for 2008 Olympics, neoliberal political-economic conditions motivated the Beijing government to employ the Olympics as a strategy to sell Beijing on the global market. Beijing's image thus underwent significant transformations when Olympic sites, major infrastructure projects, urban spectacles and entertainment venues began to crop up including a new airport, new subways, an Olympic park, and National Grand Theater etc. At a cost of \$ 40 billion--an Olympic park covering an area of 1,215 hectares, including an 80,000 seat stadium, 14 gymnasia, an athletes village, and an international exhibition centre surrounded by a 760 hectare forest and greenbelt was built. The proverbial "jewel in the crown" of the Beijing Olympics--the main stadium called the Bird's Nest--and 44 other major projects were also constructed during the Olympic period (BOBICO, 2001).

Undoubtedly, the Beijing government desired to make good use of the Olympics to promote the city image. Beijing's bid, and its preparation for the 2008 Olympics, was central to the government's strategy for image construction. The Beijing government aimed to promote "the modernization of Beijing as well as the rest of the country," and to create "a new image of Beijing" (Ejiangchunshui, 2008). And President and Party General Secretary Hu Jintao had explicitly "linked Beijing's ability to host the Olympics to the regime's central policy of promoting economic development" (deLisle, 2008, p.19). However, on the other hand, the rural migrants who offered the city a cheap labour force faced serious social injustices in this

Olympic city. Many original residents lost their homes and were forced to relocate to the fringes of the city, and large-scale demolition stimulated the most intensive class conflicts. The contradictory Beijing city image thus emerged: the prosperous, luxurious metropolis scene existed in stark contrast to the wasteland and slums surrounded by skyscrapers. For the growing middle class and city elites, Beijing became a city full of material desire, successful dreams and opportunities. For the working and labouring classes, Beijing became a city full of uneven development, injustice and exploitation.

### 3.3 *The nature of the 2008 Beijing Olympics*

Olympic boosters believe that the Games serve as a catalyst which attracts international investments for city regeneration, creates short and long term jobs, tourism, infrastructure spending, finance and insurance, and so on. As well, they emphasize that the Olympics provide a good opportunity to solve city problems such as public transit, poor environment, and poor housing facilities. Kevin Caffrey (2009), for example, believed that China could “use the opportunity of the Beijing games to exhibit the successes of the state, its logistical abilities, and its potential for the future” (p. 62). Arguably, the critical scholar Helen Jefferson Lenskyj uses the phrase “Olympic Industry” to reveal the relationship between the Games and global capitalist interests. In choosing this phrase, she challenges “the uncritical use of benign-sounding terms such as *Olympic movement*, *Olympic family*, and *Olympic spirit*---which promote mystique and elitism” (Lenskyj, 2008, p. 1). In terms of an Olympic industry, the hidden pattern of Olympic sports is constructed by global

capital and local elites. City leaders, developers, and the mass media use the Olympics as “a catalyst for urban redevelopment and infrastructure projects, largely at taxpayer’s expense” (Lenskyj, 2008, p. 2), and mask a harsher reality of the Olympic dream. According to Lenskyj, it is necessary to investigate negative impacts of the Olympics on society, the environment, and economics. Those negative impacts include: (i) huge and expensive facilities financed with taxpayer money, but not serving the needs of local communities; (ii) restrictions of citizens’ freedom of movement and civil liberties during Olympics; (iii) Olympic venues and infrastructure given priority over more important public services and, (iv) corruption in the host city selection process. Lenskyj’s provides insights useful for investigating the nature of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and demystifying the myth of the city image. In what follows, I employ many of her observations and pose questions about the impact of the Games on class relations and broader issues of inequality.

First, who were the biggest beneficiaries from the 2008 Beijing Olympics? In China, all the urban land should be possessed by the states and local governments. Local governments own the land and have the rights to manage and sell it. The official website of the 2008 Beijing Olympics showed that from 2004 to 2008, 105.5 billion yuan (13.4 billion US dollars) were contributed to the city’s GDP. However, it is estimated that 27 per cent of city income came from the selling of leased land-rights (Sina, 2009). Districts in Beijing such as Xicheng, Dongcheng, Xuanwu, and Chaoyang became powerful and benefited greatly from land sales. Besides land, local governors controlled city planning, construction, housing reform, demolition and

redevelopment of the old city. Money and land transactions involved collusion between government and private developers. Most developers either had close ties to bureaucrats or had been bureaucrats themselves. This is to say, the local government and the private developers became the most profitable interest group through the Olympic urban reconstruction. Simultaneously, the Beijing government created a favourable “business climate” for corporate sponsors. According to Chinese *Fenghuang News* (2008), the “2008 Beijing Olympics can be seen as the highest level of sponsorship, which includes 12 long-term cooperation partners, 62 Chinese and foreign enterprises as sponsors or suppliers.” In the Olympic sponsors list, 80% of sponsors were multinational companies, and the first-class sponsors included Adidas, Coca-Cola, Samsung and General Electric which paid the International Olympic Committee US \$72 million for the Beijing Olympic Games (*Chinaworker.info*, 2008). Multinational companies not only enhanced the public image, but also gained a significant profit at the same time. As Jean-Marie Brohm (1978) argues, the “the primary aim of the organizers of sports or Olympic competitions is not sport for its own sake but sport for capitalist profit; or rather their aim is capitalist profit through sport” (p.137). Generally, by exploiting public resources and taxpayers’ money, the 2008 Beijing Olympics produced huge profits for the city government, multinational companies, and city elites. After what had been dubbed the best in the history of the Games, the Chinese economy entered a period of stagflation with high inflation. Increasing high housing prices compelled people to work more hours. Moreover, the gap between the poor and the rich continues to widen and the class conflicts are even

more intense than before the Olympics. According to LSE's post-Games findings, the migrants faced exclusionary experiences of the Olympic Games. They believed that "they have no rights", and did not "received any benefits" from the Olympics. The negative impact on second-class residents indicates "the uneven distribution of the benefits and costs of the Olympic Games" (Shin & Li, 2012). In many ways, the 2008 Games greatly exacerbated the problems that were already evident in the "new" China. The consequences of neoliberalism included the lifting of price controls which sent prices soaring, "waves of unemployment" were created as job security was eliminated and deep inequalities between the "winners and losers in the new China" had already manifested themselves (Klein, 2001, p. 192).

Additionally, corruption and demolition could be regarded as two of the most negative effects of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Lenskyj (2008) pointed out that corruption and mismanagement were likely to occur during the Olympic city reconstruction project. During the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the permissions for purchase of land were rarely put up for bids on the open market; on the contrary, they were handled in secret transactions involving kickbacks and turnovers. Such a system of land management largely breeds corruption and abuse of rights. In particular, private urban developers can influence the decisions of authorities. When a private company argued that demolition projects would be profitable, city leaders used their power to intervene in urban renewal programs to ensure the interests of the capitalists. In this sense, the Beijing Olympics mobilized local government and real estate companies into profitable alliances, and by the Olympics, the Beijing government



established a long-lasting partnership with urban capitalists. Beijing's rapid construction and deconstruction under the Olympic dream made real estate one of the most corrupt areas of city administration. Beijing's former mayor, Chen Xitong, charged with corruption and abuse of power, was dismissed and sentenced to jail and he was not the only city leader to be charged. Liu Zhihua, former Vice-Mayor of Beijing, responsible for city planning and city regeneration projects, was dismissed from his position for "leading a dissolute and decadent life." It was also reported that Liu abused his power by contracting Olympic construction projects to his mistress (*China News*, 2008).

Demolition also ruined the lives of many Beijing residents. The Chinese character "*Chai*" (to be demolished), could be seen painted on buildings everywhere. During the Beijing Olympics, the Beijing government planned to demolish 231 VICs (Village in the City) accommodation 33,935 households in the name of "environmental improvement projects", and "specifically aimed at completing the projects in 171VICs before the 2008 Olympic Games." (Shin & Li, 2012, p. 2)

Neighbourhood after neighbourhood fell to the bulldozer. Skyscrapers and shopping malls replaced the *Hutong* area and the "Old city." According to Wang Jun (2003), the demolition of old Beijing city stimulated approximately 6,060 square meters of commercial housing reconstruction. In fact, it was not just older houses that were destroyed; newer apartment complexes were also demolished because selling land became a fiscal source of revenue for the local government. Private developers also realized huge profits even after deducting the compensation they paid to the original

residents. That is why most of the contradictions and conflicts blew up between demolition and compensation. During the process of demolition, private city developers used tricks to block news, and then pull down houses without advanced notice. Both Beijing permanent residents and migrants suffered from the whole city demolition, as Eitzen argued “the powerless bear the burden”(Eitzen cited in Shin & Li, 2012). Ordinary Beijing residents had to accept inadequate compensations and were relocated to temporary worker housing. Migrants had to dwell in dilapidated residents areas, and were affected by many restrictions and bans imposed as part of Beijing’s environmental control” (Shin & Li, 2012, p. 11). As I note in my subsequent analysis of *Meishi Street*, residents complained vociferously about the ill-effects of the Olympic Industry. Many of them complained that the Olympics led to the wholesale demolition of entire neighborhoods and described their displacement as a form of theft, not only for destroying Beijing’s old communities, but also for cutting off the spiritual bonds of neighbours. As Brohm (2003) points out, often times “the Olympics serve to camouflage the class struggle” (p. 155).

It is also important to realize that the Olympic industry not only operates as a strategic component of a larger process of city regeneration, but also as an ideological term for the expansion and enhancement of capitalists. *Chai* was mystified by mainstream media as beneficial for ordinary people. On the Beijing Olympics official website, one story propagandized that Beijing’s reconstruction projects had sped up Beijing’s level of modernization, that “the resettlement of disadvantaged communities” had improved living conditions for the affected households and that it had

also "improved eco-environments" (BOCOG, 2008). Another story used public relations strategies to suggest that demolitions were lawful and hardly disruptive: "Under the principle of demolition through lawful, transparent, polite and friendly manners, the legitimate rights and interests of the owners of the houses to be demolished have been guaranteed, with the impact of relocation minimized." It was also claimed that as people moved to new apartments, the problems of risk and dangerous houses had been resolved. "[T]he affected households were compensated for their previous houses according to real estate market prices, and new houses close to their original living quarters were offered to them" (BOCOG, 2008). The residents had been described as satisfied with compensation they received and "the living standards of all affected households were unchanged." As the mouthpiece of the Communist Party, the media emphasized that government had done its best for people by establishing special funds for the dispersal of poor people, providing services to elderly and disabled people and conducting on-site visits to help the displaced find new apartments. The report also noted that residents expressed their thanks to officials (BOCOG, 2008).

Jane Jacobs (1989), in her famous book *The Death and life of the Great American City*, criticized American urban planning which ignored the practical need for various forms to co-exist and mingle in the city. Jacobs (1989) called this process "the sacking of cities" (p. 4) which caused the death of the city. Similarly, in preparation for the Olympics, Chinese urban planners treated the city only as a physical space composed of streets and buildings, while ignoring the city as a place of

interaction between geographical space and local residents. However, bulldozers could not eliminate slum and image problems. Although there were few critical voices of Beijing's Olympic dream in the mainstream media, demolition triggered more intensive class antagonism.

#### CHAPTER FOUR: A CASE STUDY: THE REPRESENTATIONS OF *CHARMING BEIJING* AND *MEISHI STREET*

The Beijing Olympics were full of images which the city government fabricated in order to promote “the modernization of Beijing” and to convey “a new image of Beijing” (eBeijing, n. d.). Obviously, it regarded the Olympics not simply as a sporting event, but as a chance to promote the city image on the world stage with “... an image of a healthy and flourishing China” and to counteract the stereotype of the “sick man of East Asia” (Brownell, 2008, p. 188). In the view of Olympic boosters, the Games have become a central stage on which the national and city images can be displayed to the entire world. Therefore, the Beijing government embraced place marketing with theming, imaging, and branding techniques, to promote and sell the city image to the world. As Zhengyi Li argues, Beijing naturally wanted to host as many international visitors as possible, and the Olympiad was used as a showcase stage in 2008 (Li, n. d.).

According to Kearns and Philo (1993), selling places as the economic and social activity of urban managers, be they public or private agencies, is to sell the image. BOCOG (The Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad) and the mass media played a key role in constructing and propagandizing the city image. BOCOG successfully marketed the city as a site of commercial investment and tourist attraction; the media conveyed dominant discourses and diverted public attention away from serious domestic conflicts. Indeed, the mainstream media were instrumental in facilitating a dramatic “makeover” of Beijing’s city image from the 1993 Olympic bid to the 2008 Olympics. Thus, this

chapter focuses on the media representation of the 2008 Beijing Olympic campaign, including media publicity and a detailed analysis of the official film, *Charming Beijing*, and the alternative documentary *Meishi Street*. I attempt to investigate the close relationship between the Beijing government and mainstream media in building the image of Beijing and therefore reveal the nature of Olympic image strategies and urban regeneration projects.

#### *4.1 Media Discourses During 2008 Beijing Olympic Campaign*

The 2008 Beijing Olympic planners (governments and media) conducted an eight-year-long media campaign on television, newspaper, radio and internet. This campaign would not only promote the development of the economy but would also mobilize image, and other texts to promote specific ideological discourses. In doing so, from the two bidding processes to hosting the Olympics, the Beijing government and mass media desired to make good use of the Games to highlight a positive and attractive city image to the outside world. For the first bid, the Beijing government proposed a slogan: “For China an Opportunity, but also a World Miracle,” showing the Chinese need to be accepted as a member of the world family. The authoritative newspapers, *People’s Daily* and *Beijing Daily*, published stories with headlines such as “China’s Opportunity, Beijing’s Honour,” and “Historical City, Beijing Welcomes You” to support the bid (*People*, n. d.). They promoted the Olympic Games as a national affair, and created a momentum in which nation was foregrounded, especially after the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989 which greatly damaged China’s international reputation. However, the strategies eventually failed, with China

losing to Sydney, Australia by two votes. The main reason for this failure had been attributed to “human rights” as voices from western countries questioned the repressive practices of the Chinese government. By 2001, Beijing had decided to bid again. The new strategies were different; Beijing was foregrounded while the Chinese government provided background support for the cause/bid. BOCOG, Beijing’s Organising Committee for the 2008 Games, not the Chinese government, launched the bidding campaign. The city chose the motto “New Beijing, Great Olympics” to emphasize its move towards a new image for the new millennium. The official logo of the games, called “Dancing Beijing” featured a stylized calligraphic character *Jing*, meaning “capital” and mascots *Fuwa*, meaning ‘Beijing welcomes you.’ By avoiding sensitive political topics, Beijing successfully took advantage of the 2008 Olympic Games to rebuild and improve the Chinese image. Miquel De Moragas Spà et al. (1995) argue that the Olympics is a media-constructed reality (p. 4). During the 2008 Beijing Olympics, mainstream media played the role of government mouth piece to mobilize image, sound, and text to cultivate a symbolic environment in which a sense of solidarity and harmony in the whole nation was communicated. For example, the concept “One World, One Dream,” was the headline banner on each web page of the official site and defined Beijing as a city eager to conform to international practices in the process of globalization. In terms of image construction, the bid and preparation process was largely a showcase of the city. In particular, three themes “Green Olympics,” “Hi-tech Olympics,” and “People’s Olympics” could be regarded as parts of an elaborate publicity stunt. The *Xinhua News* agency published a series of

promotional stories on the “Green Olympics,” emphasizing a long-term system of environmental protection. Various stories stated that air quality during the Olympics would be acceptable and a colourful picture of a clear, blue sky with white clouds was used to illustrate this (*Xinhua News*, n. d.). In order to emphasize the “people” idea, the Olympic logo depicted a figure running, and it also embodied the shapes of three well-known Chinese characters: the character “京” for Beijing, “文” for culture, and the character “人” for a human person. The official website accounted for the concept “People’s Olympics,” by stating it would “give first consideration to the needs of people. We will organize diversified cultural and educational programs to cater to the needs of the people, especially the younger generation. We will also encourage the widest participation of the people in the preparation for the Games, as it will greatly push forward the sports and cultural development nationwide and increase the cohesion and pride of the Chinese nation”(eBeijing, n. d.). The website also emphasized that hosting the Olympic Games would improve people’s living standards: “the Olympic Games will give impetus to economic development and urban construction and management, and bring about increasing benefits for the people. We will make the preparations for the Olympic Games a process of substantially improving the people’s living standard, both materially and culturally” (eBeijing, n. d.).

Moreover, mainstream media continued to instil in people a common belief: the Olympic Games are a national affair reflecting the collective achievement of the whole nation; therefore, supporting the idea that the Olympic Games contribute to



patriotism and nationalism. Party-controlled media, *Xinhua News* conveyed the consensus that “across the country, the Chinese people are celebrating the occasion in various ways.” It especially showed how the people of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous region and Tibet welcomed and expected this grand occasion (*Xinhua News*, 2008). It was evident that the core strategy of the mainstream media was to focus on the positive side of China by separating politics from sports. The voices of a few local residents expressing appreciation to the government provided the perfect piece of propaganda for the Beijing municipal government. McCombs and Shaw assert that “mass media, by selectively covering some issues and ignoring others, influence what people think about and what they consider important” (cited in Zhou, 2009, p.52). This avoidance strategy meant not talking politics and marginalizing social and class conflicts that were emerging at the time. Chinese authorities promised a free media environment for the Games (deLisle, 2008). However, by virtue of government-imposed restrictions, mainstream media tended to hide and distract international attention from the deleterious side effects of China’s breakneck modernization. On the surface, the 2008 Olympics provided an important platform for China and Beijing to achieve international recognition and world city status. All images and signs presented Beijing as an ideal city with a high quality of life. However, these were symbolic and ideological weapons by which the Beijing government and mainstream media successfully concealed some controversial issues such as unemployment, corruption, political oppression and the contradiction between the promise of benefits for all citizens and the lived reality of Beijing residents.

In the following section, I compare and analyze *Charming Beijing*, an official film produced by the Beijing government and an alternative documentary, *Meishi Street*, which was produced by independent director Ou Ning using a social semiotic approach. The representation of the city image is analyzed with three layers in mind: the first analytic layer consists of syntagmatic and paradigmatic dimensions. According to Saussure (1983), syntagmatic relations refer to other signifiers co-present within the text, while paradigmatic relations refer to signifiers which are absent from the text (p.122). The value of a sign is determined by both which provide a structural context within which signs make sense. The second layer employs Barthes' myth theory to reveal underlying meanings of signs. The third layer situates the texts in their broader context in order to analyze the manifestations of ideology and hegemony, and explore how the representations of mainstream text are related to the needs of a dominant class while those deriving from an alternative source are related to the interests of working class citizens affected by Beijing's transformation in preparation for the 2008 Olympic Games.

#### 4.2 *The Representation of the Official Film Charming Beijing*

*Charming Beijing*, produced by the BOCOG, is a six minute video. It features a modern, vibrant and dynamic city image, and intertwines the Olympic spirit, urban culture, and political propaganda. The film is divided into four parts: morning to night, outlining the urban landscape, Beijing's history, culture, and people's activities. All signs in the film are fragmented and unrelated (see Table in Appendix B); what is presented is a melange of urban and cultural symbols: urban calisthenics, mass fitness,

gloriously clear skies, soaring flocks of birds, and images of people young and old. However, the whole film creates a semiotic environment in which all signs contribute to a sense of a new city image which is modern, prosperous, and harmonious. Also, the director of the film attempts to deploy every sign to represent three main themes: Green Olympics, Hi-tech Olympics, and People's Olympics. Generally, the whole film contributes to "the firm belief of a great nation, with long history of 5,000 years and on its way to modernization, that it is committed to peaceful development, harmonious society and people's happiness"(BOCOG, 2006).

The image represented in the film is closely tied up with the theme of Green Olympics. Obviously, the colour green appears in all parts of the film represented in shots of grass, natural landscapes, streets, and residential housing. As Barthes (1972) points out "it is the insistence of a kind of behaviour which reveals its intention" (p.119). In this view, the repetition of the colour green through different shots constructed an environmental myth. Promoting a green Olympics as a pledge of the Beijing government, BOCOG made huge promises for environmental protection in order to "... drastically improve the environmental quality of the capital and build it into an ecological city" (eBeijing, n. d.). According to media reports, Beijing invested heavily in green construction materials and sustainable energy for the Olympic Village and made momentous efforts to clean the city's notoriously dirty air and water. In fact, they only created an impression of cleanliness during the Olympics. Some factories were scheduled to close for months and much of the city's workforce was eventually told or encouraged to take vacations preceding and during the Olympics.

Thus, the director deliberately used visual symbols to imply a healthy environment in Beijing. It is obvious that the recurring and extensive use of green was not only used to gloss over China's serious environmental problems, but also to create a false impression for the audience.

In order to convey the theme of a high technology Olympics and portray China's modern urban landscape, the director deliberately chose signs such as steel and concrete skyscrapers glittering in the sunshine, and white collar workers shuttling back and forth in modern offices to demonstrate the development of Beijing. Also, the director especially highlights some people using technological devices such as computers, notebooks and mobile phones, with smiles and faces of satisfaction. All these images represent a developed, prosperous and powerful city, a new Beijing with "splendid accomplishments" in the high-tech field. However, by choosing symbols of advanced technology to represent the ideal modern city image, the director positions the Beijing citizen as "the kind of person" who can use and has access to high-technology equipment. This obviously excludes poor people who cannot access or afford advanced technology. As Barthes (1972) states, "the use of the signification is here, hiding behind the fact, and conferring on it a notifying look" (p.124). Thus, one could argue that the prominent focus on advanced technology carries class connotations which address a specific affluent audience while excluding the less affluent majority.

*Charming Beijing* also offers a complex class discourse on the third theme: the People's Olympics. Chinese paintings, the Beijing opera, Chinese porcelain, Beijing

*Hutong*, kites, and calligraphy are all fragmented images showing an ideal city with a high quality of life. Overwhelming and exaggerated national symbols in the film connote national pride and identity while masking the social realities of economic inequality and the displacement experienced by many residents of the city much like Barthes' famous example of the "Negro" soldier glossed over the realities of French colonialism. Moreover, we see a lot of images of children, adolescents, and the elderly in *Charming Beijing*, yet, throughout the whole film, the absence of the government in images is obvious. As the administrator of a city, the government needs to serve its citizens; however, with the exception occurring at the 03:02 minute mark in the film with a traffic policeman directing a traffic jam, the rest of the film does not show any image of the city governors. Arguably, "there is a place which is full and one which is empty" (Barthes, 1972, p.122); the absence of government images linked by a relation of ideology. More precisely, skilfully hiding the image of governors was arguably intended to obscure the oppressive practices which they implemented in the run-up to the 2008 Olympic Games. In this sense, the theme of the People's Olympics clearly attempted to obfuscate the contradictions between the promise of "improving people's living standard" and the actual practices of demolition which largely destroyed peoples' lives.

In general, *Charming Beijing* as a production of the Beijing Olympic Committee and national Olympic Organizing Committee inevitably represented the dominant discourse, and attempted to conceal the negative impact of the Olympic Games and the domestic conflicts that were brewing under the surface. As the

BOCOG demonstrated, their goal was to “host high-level Olympic Games and high-level Olympics with distinguishing features, [in particular] Chinese style, cultural splendour, contemporary spirits, and mass participation” (BOCOG, 2006). Therefore, the city image shaped in *Charming Beijing* was fully consistent with the Chinese government’s ideology. All scenes were fleeting and quickly delivered; the film is encoded such that the audience is mesmerized by beautiful pictures with little time to contemplate the connotations of the images, and thereby are, arguably, distracted from social reality. The film proposes a sense of “the way Beijing is,” an identity which may have led viewers to assume that the images were representative of reality despite their obvious fabrication. The political and ideological motivations that animated this short film are largely invisible in the text itself. However, it is in these consistent images of the prosperous urban good life, the beautiful scene, and the high-tech environment that we encounter the implicit boundaries of class contradiction and social reality encoded within the texts.

I now turn my attention to several images in order to analyze the nature of the mythical signification, and political implications within them, and how the director used visual language to convey social meaning.

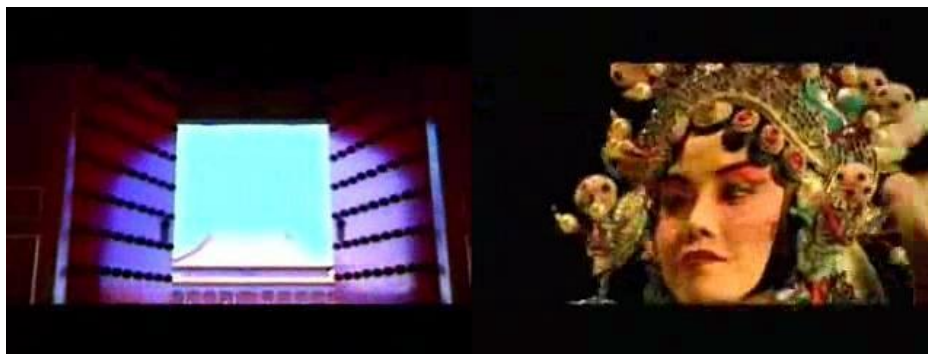


Illustration 1: Image of *Charming Beijing*: screenshot, 00:24, 03:41 (BOCOG, n.d.)

*Charming Beijing* embodied the Beijing's Olympic strategy of accentuating the city as an ancient, mysterious, Oriental city, "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories, and landscapes, remarkable experiences"(Said, 2003, p.1). In Hall's view, one sort of difference seems to attract others, adding up to a spectacle of otherness (Hall, 1997[c], p.232). In the case of *Charming Beijing*, we see the ancient culture of Beijing as a key element displayed in this film. Beijing's antiquated, folkloric, and mysterious cultural past was being promoted with the intent of attracting a global audience. In this way, Beijing was constructed as the "other" to be consumed by a western audience. Clearly, the representation of those images reinforces the stereotypical image of the Orient which reflects Western style domination. Edward W. Said (2003) argues that, Orientalism was a discourse, reflecting western hegemony, by which "European culture was able to manage-and even produce- the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively"(p. 7-8). In this view, the representation of the Orient city was "a structure of lies or of myths;" its underlying messages related to what Gramsci called "culture hegemony." The Beijing government regarded the Olympics as a symbolic opportunity to transcend difference between the West and the East. However, the promotional strategies were arguably designed to to sell "Oriental" images tailored to the tastes of western world. By representing stunning symbols of an Oriental city, China attempted to enter and accommodate itself to the western world.

As the capital of China, Beijing contains a number of political symbols such as Tiananmen <sup>5</sup>Square and *Zhongnanhai*.<sup>6</sup> How do we read the following pictures, in Barthes' term—myth; what is its myth? And how does it function?



Illustration 2: Tiananmen square in *Charming Beijing*: screenshot, 02:04 (BOCOG, n.d.)



Illustration 3: Tiananmen Square in *Charming Beijing*: Screenshot, 03:29 (BOCOG, n.d.)

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<sup>5</sup> Tiananmen: Often referred to as the front entrance to the Forbidden City, was first built during the Ming Dynasty in 1420. It is widely used as a national symbol.

<sup>6</sup> Zhongnanhai: An area in central Beijing, which serves as the central headquarters for the Communist Party of China, and the State Council of China. Zhongnanhai can be regarded as a sign of Chinese political power.



Here, I employ Hall's approach to analyze the underlying meaning of these pictures. Tiananmen Square, the symbol and centre of Chinese political power, appears two times in *Charming Beijing*. The first scene, at the 02:04 minute mark, shows ordinary people riding bicycles passing through Tiananmen Square. The blue sky and the red Tiananmen building and Chairman Mao's photo are a blur across the scene. The second time Tiananmen Square appears, at the 03:29 minute mark, includes images of cyclists wearing spandex shorts speeding past Tiananmen Square. In the background of this image, we can identify the slogan "Long Live the People's Republic of China". The mainstream media always tend to emphasize that the Olympics, as a sporting mega-event, is seemingly devoid of political and class issues. However, as in previous contexts, political power played a crucial role in the 2008 Olympics. These two photos function at the level of the "myth". The first is a literal level of meaning; that is, Tiananmen Square provides the backdrop to sport for both ordinary people and professional athletes. Then there is the more connotative meaning, Tiananmen symbolizes power and the highest political authority of socialist China but it also invokes the memory of the Tiananmen Massacre. This is a clear clue which reveals how myth works. Tiananmen Square is China's most well-known image, Chinese people are familiar with it, and all tourists are attracted towards it. It is both a political space and public showcase. In the first picture, by focusing on the bicycle and choosing Tiananmen Square as the background for peoples' activities, the director conveys the meaning that Tiananmen is a peaceful, harmonious, and safe place. It is a triumphalist space for public representation. Obviously, the government attempts to

sweep away the televised image of tanks and blood in Tiananmen Square while also attempting to boost domestic credibility and portray China's harmony and steadfastness. In this way, it masks the uneven development, and social conflicts in China. Hall (1997[c]) argues that "the visual image is a very powerful one..... and the same photo can carry several, quite different, sometimes diametrically opposite meanings" (p. 228). The director particularly chose the bicycle not only because it is the most common vehicle in China but also an environmentally friendly mode of transportation. Additionally, the background with images of a clear blue sky further provides evidence that China's environment is reliable and can be trusted.

Connotatively, there is a different meaning fixed with the second picture – speed and ideology. Cycling represents speed: the speed of China's economic development, and the speed of China's increasing political power on the world stage. In this picture, the athletes were eclipsed, they were turned into the Chinese ambition. The background slogan "Long Live the People's Republic of China" has political implications. It represents the history of the Chinese political and economic system---so-called socialism with Chinese characteristics. Dyer observes that "the establishment of normalcy through social and stereo-types is one aspect of the habit of ruling groups.....to attempt to fashion the whole of society according to their own world view, value system, sensibility and ideology. So right is this world view for the ruling groups that they make it appear as natural and inevitable, and for everyone, and, in so far as they succeed, they establish their hegemony"(Dyer, 2006, p. 356).

Undoubtedly, the political ideology behind this image is that China unwaveringly

carries out its own, distinctly Chinese path. This image is a trailer for the whole film and it thus became a key sign of social representation. Generally, the common ground between the two images is that the director artfully used Tiananmen Square to conceal its volatile political history and its significance as a site of resistance.

The images in *Charming Beijing* display the Chinese government and Beijing city leaders' possessions to glorify the city image and constitute the dominant ideology. They contain paradoxical meanings: the ancient city image and the modernization and development of Beijing. It uses myths to replace real social lives, and conceals social issues such as environmental problems and class struggles. However, I have pointed out the difference between the scenes and lived lives, the difference between tourists and common people, and the difference between the higher urban culture and lower urban culture. Generally, the representation in the whole film is a myth which conveyed the ideology of Chinese Communist Party, it served as an expression of the official discourse, catered to the benefits of the ruling class and government, and collaborated in the construction of the myth of the city image.

#### *4.3 The Representation of Alternative Film Meishi Street*

The documentary *Meishi Street* is a part of the urban project of *Da Zha Lan*, which was launched by an independent director, Ou Ning. *Da Zha Lan*, located in the southwestern corner of Tiananmen Square, is a typical slum in the centre of Beijing. The project of *Da Zha Lan* focuses on the historical and cultural development, poverty level, social organization, and humanist ecology of this region.

*Meishi Street* narrates the struggle between ordinary people and the Beijing government. For the 2008 Beijing Olympics, in the name of new city image, large-scale demolition swept across the whole city. Over 7000 *Hutong* that once made up the old city, were systematically destroyed (Wang, 2008). As one of the *Hutong* areas, Meishi Street would be demolished for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The background of documentary *Meishi Street* is a noisy construction zone, extremely crowded and poor. Conditions of hygiene are appalling and public security is chaotic. Eight hundred year old houses on Meishi Street were disappearing, but the neighbourhood was not yet entirely gone. Residents tried to save their homes and generated enough publicity to force discussion with the government. The core conflict between residents and the government was compensation. Many residents of older neighbourhoods were unemployed, elderly and ill, often with no fixed income. The compensation did not allow them to go back to the old neighbourhood, and they were forced to relocate to the city's outskirts without convenient access to hospitals and markets. As a result, their survival was jeopardized. To some degree, the documentary *Meishi Street* accurately represents grassroots life style and their struggles in China.

*Meishi Street* is an observational documentary which is “characterized by the non-intervention of the film maker in the filmed events” (Buckland, 1998, p.109). In this film, the director Ou Ning was completely invisible. He rallied volunteers to participate in the film shooting, and gave cameras to ordinary residents in Meishi Street whose houses were facing demolition. In this sense, he is “an uninvolved bystander” (Buckland, 1998, p. 109). These amateur filmmakers captured the typical,

day-to-day events that took place during the demolition, negotiations, and struggles with dominant powers. The leading character of *Meishi Street*, Mr. Zhang Jinli, known as “stubborn nails” (people who did not want to move), is deeply involved in the film making. Undoubtedly, Zhang is not a professional photographer and simply recorded his and his neighbours’ experiences. In fact, the whole film is raw and rough: the filmmaking is unprofessional, plots are fragmented, the lenses are not neat, the structure of the film is loose, and many scenes are shaky and fuzzy. However, these techniques give the film a sense of realism; the life of Zhang Jinli’s family and its neighbourhood is weaved through with demolition stories throughout the whole movie. We are presumably given a glimpse into the real lives of ordinary Beijing people without any embellishment. In this view, this documentary unveils the myth underlying the discourse of urban reconstruction.

The representation of the film can be analyzed in two parts: the daily life of residents and an anti-demolition movement. As to the daily lives of residents, *Meishi Street* demonstrates a real grassroots lifestyle and the environment where they live. The ancient, densely populated enclaves, with narrow and winding streets and crumbling courtyard houses, is home to old Beijing residents, floating people, and other working-class people—those at the bottom of the class hierarchy. Many houses had been removed leaving wide open paths as if carved by tornadoes marking where new roads were planned. The documentary begins with a common early morning: workers are riding bicycles and passing through old and crowded streets, a sanitation worker is sweeping the streets, and the elderly are doing morning exercises. In terms

of an anti-demolition movement, the film focuses on conflicts between residents and city governors. The governors refused to discuss details of compensation, while residents usually found out the deadlines when leaflets were posted on the outer walls of their houses. A resident of Liu claimed in the documentary, “They sweep everything that’s unfair right under the rug. They do not let common people know about it. There is no good for us.” In addition, developers used tricks to force residents to move out and signed unfair agreements. One resident said “there are lots of powerful people and interests involved in the demolition and removal process. The demands of common people cannot get through. They demolish and grab as much land as they possibly can” (Ou, 2006).

In this film, the most frequent antagonistic discourses are a variety of banners and leaflets. Some are posted by the government and others are posted by local residents. The government’s propaganda slogans are slung mainly over demolition sites or posted on the outer walls of houses. Those signs emphasize urban reconstruction projects for the Beijing Olympics as “patriotic” tasks and residents were therefore expected to “support and participate actively in urban construction projects.” Some emphasized the importance of stability and a harmonious Chinese society with messages referring to “creating a harmonious society and building a pleasant home together.” However, banners posted by local residents delivered different information and conveyed a sense of resistance. Some were moderate such as those that stated that the “forced demolition and removal” violated “national law;” others more intensely expressed strong anti-government emotion such as “abuse of

power crushes the common people” and “go to hell, China’s government.” The film does not directly reflect the conflicts between the government and the local residents; however, through various forms of banners and signs, one can sense the tensions between the people and the government.

A phenomenon worthy of note is the way in which Chairman Mao’s image is applied in the film, especially during negotiations between local residents and the government. Zhang Jinli posted Mao’s photos and rebellious banners next to Mao’s photos, with words cited from Mao’s quotations such as “against the demolitions” and “safeguard the legal right of people.” In this regard, the symbol of Chairman Mao was employed to challenge the ruling powers.



Illustration 4 : Mao’s banner in *Meishi Street*: screenshot, 00:21:40 (Ou, 2006.

Used with permission)

“Mao’s symbol” is polysemic and has paradoxical meanings in this film. Mao Zedong had been mythologized for many years through socialist propaganda. In the

Maoist era, housing policy was different. People lived in so-called *Danyuans* (large residential complexes) which were distributed by the *Danwei* (work units). Under this situation, neither factory workers nor *Hutong* residents were expected to afford a house by themselves. “*Danyuan* provided a convenient and safe environment in which *Danwei* employees and their families lived and worked in a campus-like privileged community”(Li, et al., 2008, p.185). With *Hutong* life relatively stable, most residents lived in the same county yard for generations. Mao, to some degree, was deified as the representative leader of common people and the working class. The ritual invocation of Mao is a signifier, “the inevitable character of the natural epithets with which his name was surrounded” (Barthes, 1972, p.147); a signified was “the intention to respect orthodoxy, discipline and unity by the Chinese Communist party” (p. 147). The signification was a sanctified Mao. Through the myth, Mao’s ideology was deeply rooted in peoples’ minds. They believed that Mao was on their side and always stood by them. As Barthes (1972) argues, “the left always defines itself in relation to the oppressed, whether proletarian or colonized.” On the contrary, Deng and his successors drove them to the suburbs, and made their lives hard. Deng’s housing policy was based on the neoliberal economic model. Houses were no longer public property and *Danwei* no longer provided housing. Instead, people were expected to afford a house on their own. That’s why we saw *Hutong* residents like Zhang Jinli employ Mao’s image and quotes to contest contemporary dominant power. In fact, in the history of new China, Mao launched a series of class struggle movements such as an anti-rightist movement, and the Cultural Revolution, which caused political chaos



and economic crisis. He represented the hegemony of Chinese socialism. The myth of Mao was arguably “an artificial myth, a reconstituted myth” (Barthes, 1972, p.149).

Generally, the documentary *Meishi Street* strongly represents the most sensitive social contradiction---*Chaiqian* (to be demolished). While it is difficult to determine exactly how many people were forcibly evicted for city beautification, Olympic tourism and the construction of other urban facilities related to the Games, estimates range from 1.25 to 2 million (COHRE, 2008; DeMontigny, 2008). And many of those resisting evictions were jailed and allegedly tortured (DeMontigny, 2008). In reality, *Chaiqian* was inevitably met with the resistance of local residents and communities especially when government and developers were deliberately vague about their demolition plans. In *Meishi Street*, tracking all the signs of the documentary, we can clearly see how intensive conflicts were triggered by demolitions. Like Zhang Jinli in *Meishi Street*, people did not accept unfair compensations and were forced to leave. They were relocated to temporary worker housing. This despicable behaviour spurred the resistance. As shown in the image below, policemen and common people stood in silence, watching a neighbour's house being torn down. The camera lens is panned away from the crowd and at that moment the atmosphere seemed frozen.



Illustration 5 : Demolition scene in *Meishi Street* : screenshot, 00:22:28 (Ou, 2006.

Used with permission)

Indeed, most sequences demonstrate how the government violated peoples' civil and property rights without notice and discussion. As Zhang Jinli said, the "Xuanwu district government illegally forc[ed] the eviction of my family. They take out family land. They are likely a bunch of gangsters (Ou, 2006). *Meishi Street* director Ou Ning published a group of photos about the redeveloped area in 2010. *Meishi Street* is now an access road to the west of the major artery *Qianmen Street*, which had been converted into a pedestrian thoroughfare with restaurants and shops. The old courtyard homes have all disappeared. A new courtyard spruced up by developers is for sale to rich people with millions of dollars, while old residents were given very little compensation and were relocated to the inner city.

#### 4.4 Comparing the Representations of *Charming Beijing* and *Meishi Street*

How the mainstream media and alternative media portrayed and represented the official city image versus the lived realities of the people is a crucial issue for my thesis. *Charming Beijing* is full of saturated and bright colors, elegant music and

carefully selected idyllic pictures. It is evident that *Charming Beijing* filtered sensitive information and produced a constructed fiction; the representation was then transformed into a global commodity through the discourse of marketing and advertising. The perfect Beijing image created a semiotics of space reflecting the dominant ideology in *Charming Beijing*. As Lacey (1998) argues, “the dominant ideology does not solely structure the operations of the economy, it also forms the basis for more fundamental social interaction” (p.98). By contrast, *Meishi Street* conveyed “raw information” that accurately reflected the reality of the lives of local residents; the film largely demonstrates the social reality and so challenges the urban myth promoted by the state. An interesting phenomenon is that some similar signs were used in both films, but they connote different meanings. I pay particular attention to three signs in what follows--*Hutong*, morning exercise, and urban culture--in terms of how colours, lighting, and clothing were used to socially construct different meanings.

***Hutong:***



Illustration 6 : *Hutong in Charming Beijing*: screenshot, 01:20 (BOCOG, n.d.)



Illustration 7 : *Hutong in Meishi Street*: screenshot, 00:05:43 (Ou, 2006. Used with permission)

Both films used the image of *Hutong*. Beijing's *Hutong* is an important city symbol which illustrates the life changes of Beijing's residents. In *Charming Beijing*, as a heritage of urban landscape, the image of *Hutong* appears for only about 20

seconds. In *Meishi Street*, the image of *Hutong* serves as the background throughout the entire film. As a social symbol, *Hutong* shares its joy and sadness with common Beijingers. Thus, the representation of *Hutong* delivers different social meaning in different films. As Hall insists, “there is nothing natural about any kind of communication; messages have to be constructed before they can be sent” (cited in Turner, 2003, p.73). *Charming Beijing* depicts an attractive visual image of *Hutong*: blue sky with red painted houses, and white walls with gray tiles which constitute a historical and cultural sense of the city. Moreover, the image of *Hutong* was divided perfectly: *Hutong* road, red doors, blue sky shots, each run for 1/3 of the scenes. This representation of *Hutong* demonstrates and symbolizes a fantasy place rather than a real environment. By contrast, in *Meishi Street*, *Hutong* is a messy, noisy, dirty and crowded area. The tone of many scenes is always grey with cloudy skies, mottled outer walls, and ruins. More important than the difference between the two images is what local residents do in *Hutong*. In *Charming Beijing*, a person appears in *Hutong* with a blurry background wearing a white shirt and black pants; the viewer cannot judge his profession and it is also hard to identify his feelings and what his life is like. The people’s image was rendered ambiguous. As Barthes (1972) argues, “myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion.....entrusted with glossing over an intentional concept” (p.128). *Hutong* seems to be represented through sharply polarized, binary extremes, good/bad, civilized/primitive, ugly/attractive in the two films. In *Meishi Street*, it is the life background of ordinary people, and it is the home to small shop owners, retired

workers, migrant workers, and other working-class people. In this sense, if *Charming Beijing* obscures the true features, undoubtedly, *Meishi Street* reveals the myth of the official city image.

### **Sports (morning exercises)**

As a promotional film, *Charming Beijing* shows many Chinese traditional sports such as shuttlecocks, kites, bicycling, and *Tai Chi Quan*. In contrast, *Meishi Street* shows some popular mass sports in peoples' daily life such as climbing and boxing. Compared to *Meishi Street*, the sports represented in *Charming Beijing* are like performances rather than real sports.



Illustration 8 : Flying a kite in *Charming Beijing*: screenshot, 02:21 (BOCOG, n.d.)



Illustration 9 : *Tai Chi Quan* in *Charming Beijing*: screenshot, 03:45 (BOCOG,n.d.)

The first is an image of the sport of flying a kite. Normally, flying kites should happen on the grassland or in a big open square, but in the above image, the elderly man is flying a kite among skyscrapers, a forest of steel and concrete, which is not a very common occurrence. The elderly person is not just flying a kite, he is flying the hope of Chinese society. Arguably the combination of the image is far-fetched. This is similar to the second image in which an elderly person and a child, dressed in traditional robes—rather than the everyday clothes most people wear while exercising—are shown practicing the traditional sport of *Tai Chi Quan* in the front of the Forbidden City<sup>7</sup>. Images of the elderly appeared frequently in *Charming Beijing*. To some extent, the elderly symbolize Beijing's long history and culture, especially in the film where such images were often tied up with traditional cultural forms such as kites, painting, calligraphy, and so on. Arguably, the two images are symbolic and

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<sup>7</sup> The Forbidden City was the Chinese imperial palace from the Ming Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty. For almost 500 years, it serves as the home of emperors and their households, as well as the ceremonial and political center of Chinese government.

ideological as the ancient Chinese traditional sport, with an elderly practitioner mixed in with modern skyscrapers, is meant to deliver meanings of harmony, energy and the future of Chinese society. In other words, images were used to portray Beijing as a compatible, harmonious city embracing the traditional and modern, history and energy, and the young and the old in the same urban space. Generally, *Charming Beijing* provided visually modern hybridity itself: the traditional mixed with the modern, and “the East and the West together” (*Beijing Daily*, 2006). One could reasonably conclude that these images were more geared to an international audience—for consumption in the West.

*Meishi Street* also uses images of morning exercises but the connotations are quite different.



Illustration 10 : *Kung Fu in Meishi Street*: screenshot, 00:11:49 (Ou, 2006. Used with permission)

Whereas *Charming Beijing* used images of morning exercises to illustrate the “performance of sports,” *Meishi Street* represented the morning exercises of ordinary people. In *Meishi Street*, the images of morning exercise last about 1 minute and 30



seconds. Zhang Jinli and his neighbors, wearing casual sweaters, practice boxing and tree climbing. The image marked its difference by using non-professional sports and public park as signifiers.

### Urban culture



Illustration 11 : Urban culture in *Charming Beijing*: screenshot, 05:18 (BOCOG, n.d.)



Illustration 12 : Urban culture in *Meishi Street*: screenshot, 00:56:36 (Ou, 2006. Used with permission)

Castells (1977) refers to “urban culture” as “a certain system of values, norms, and social relations possessing a historical specificity and its own logic of organization and transformation” (p.74). The urban culture demonstrated in *Charming*

*Beijing* is a showcase of the city image. By using the same strategy, the director mixes Chinese and Western art forms. *Charming Beijing* shows opera, ballet, piano, audience, lighting, and choreography, as all elegantly shining in the night sky of urban space. And also, all arts and cultural activities are held in gorgeous halls and grand theatres. The high-key lighting is reserved for luminous stars dressed in fantastic clothing, with shifting shadows upon them. The light, the costumes, and the stylish atmosphere, are all symbols implying elite art forms which are far removed from the working class. By contrast, the cultural activities in *Meishi Street* are more mundane and simple. Zhang Jinli and his neighbour are dressed in everyday clothing and sing old songs. Hall (1997[c]) contends that [there is] a connection between representation, difference, and power (p.259). When we think of power in representation in relation to the images in *Charming Beijing* and *Meishi Street*, there is a difference between elite culture and mass culture, high culture and low culture. More precisely, power is represented “not only in terms of economic exploitation . . . but also in broader cultural or symbolic terms” (Hall, 1997[c], p.259). Based on this view, the vision of urban life merging other urban codes constitutes the myth of culture which deeply reflects the social inequality, the gap between city elites and ordinary people.

In terms of image construction, the promotional film *Charming Beijing* along with other advertising and marketing initiatives mystified the transformation of the city image. In Barthes’s (1972) view, myth is signification and a way of thinking about people and products. The function of myth is to make something ideal and natural. Barthes (1972) also points out several ways by which myth attempts to erase

history and present things as natural. In *Charming Beijing*, all images for us are to “enjoy to this beautiful object without wondering where it comes from” (Barthes, 1972, p.152). The repetition of national symbols seems like what Barthes (1972) called “tautology” which can “only take refuge behind the argument of authority” (p.153). The reality of Tiananmen Square I analyzed above is “first reduced to analogues, then it is weighed, finally.....it is got rid of” (Barthes, 1972, p.154). And the representation of the Oriental city deeply reflects what Barthes refers to as “myth” on the right as the dominant ideology “continuously transforms the products of history into essential types.....it cannot rest until it has obscured the ceaseless making of the world, fixated this world into an object which can be forever possessed” (Barthes, 1972, p.156). Generally, the director covered “all the experiences of confrontation”, and reduced “any otherness to sameness”. In the name of development, progress, people, and Olympic spirit, mass media and dominant class mystified the transformation of the image of the city.

Likewise, we see the left myth in the documentary of *Meishi Street* through the idolization of Chair Mao. However, on the whole, compared to the symbolic representation of *Charming Beijing*, the way the documentary *Meishi Street* explored the city was to challenge the dominant ideology and reveal the myth of the official city image. As Barthes (1972) argues, “the oppressed is nothing, he has only one language, that of his emancipation. The oppressor is everything; his language is rich, multiform, supple, with all the possible degree of dignity at its disposal: he has an exclusive right to meta-language. The oppressed makes the world, he has only an

active, transitive language. The oppressor conserves it, his language is plenary, intransitive, gestural, theatrical: it is Myth. The language of the former aims at transforming, of the latter at eternalizing (p.150).

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

With the rapid urbanization embedded in a neoliberal market economy, Chinese cities were recreated as sites of capital accumulation. The city image was correspondingly advertised and commodified by dominant interests. Especially during the 2008 Olympics, the Beijing city image was promoted as an Oriental yet modern and advanced “commodity” to the global market. The whole world became a consumer of the Chinese mythical city vision. Barthes (1972) argues that the myth-consumer takes the signification for a system of facts: myth is read as a factual system, whereas it is but a semiological system (p.130). Therefore, the intention of my research was to decipher the myth of the city image by analyzing and comparing the representation of two films: the mainstream promotional film *Charming Beijing* and the alternative resource *Meishi Street*. I argued that the city image constructed in *Charming Beijing* is mythical distortion and inflexion of Chinese social reality. By situating the study of the city image within a broader social and economic context including Chinese neoliberalism and the Olympic industry, I argued that the prosperous facade of the city image mystified Chinese neoliberal policy and concealed urban problems, social injustices, and class conflicts.

Hosting the Olympics perfectly suited the dreams of the Chinese elite as they constructed the image of an ascendant Great Nation that was displayed on the mega-sport stage. Urban regeneration was considered an important means by which the world could witness a changing, developing, confident and ambitious China. In this sense, the myth of the city image embodied the Chinese political imagination. In

*Charming Beijing*, the city was presented as a modern, advanced metropolis mixed with mysterious, oriental flavour. Thus, the paradoxical meaning in *Charming Beijing* is both “modern and oriental.” The image portrayed greatness and progress for its domestic audience while the Orientalist aspects arguably satisfied the West’s desire to experience “otherness.”

It is also important to note that that the state used the city image to strengthen its domination. By invoking discourses of patriotism and nationalism, governments and the mass media attempted to sell the 2008 Games as the “People Olympics.” They disguised urban problems by referring to “quality of life,” “development” and progress. Mainstream media, mouthpieces of the party, played a key role in propagandizing neoliberal policies. The positive effects of the Olympics were exaggerated and emphasized repeatedly. Words such as “the best,” “harmony,” “economic boom,” and “Olympic dream” often appeared in Olympic-related special programming in newspapers and television. Through such strategies, they eased and distorted the contradiction and conflicts caused by city reconstruction projects. In particular, they often mystified demolition as beneficial for ordinary people and suggested that Chinese society, broadly construed, would become more prosperous (*Xiao Kang She Hui*), and harmonious. (*He Xie She Hui*). Therefore, the myth of the city image was also used to sustain control and strengthen existing power arrangements and social structures.

To debunk the myth of the official city image, I also situated its construction in relation to the political and economic context in which it was communicated.

China's Olympic industry was marked by its development within a neoliberal-based economy. As I analyzed in previous chapters, by delineating the trajectory of Chinese neoliberalism, we clearly see its function and effects on urban development. With the disappearance of the old city of Beijing and the privatization of real estate, houses were sold and/or demolished and different classes were separated into different neighbourhoods. Middle-class and wealthier residents were relocated to high-rise communities while the working classes and poor migrants were driven out to the suburbs. Arguably, the Chinese urban transition eventually led to the formation of a new underclass consisting of the urban poor and rural migrants.

*Meishi Street* can be considered a powerful tool in challenging the official city image. It deeply reflected and exposed the discrepancy between the city image and people's real lives. Generally, from a political economic perspective, the myth of the city image functioned at two distinct yet often entwined dimensions: global and local. Increasingly, the competitive global economy is a catalyst for the development of so-called global cities. As Saskia Sassen (1991) points out, "the more globalized the economy becomes, the higher the agglomerations of central functions in a relatively few sites, that is, the global cities" (p. 5). By integrating into a global neoliberal economy, the city of Beijing aspired to be one of a number of global cities. Therefore, the nature of the myth is designed to transform the city image into a strategic commodity-sign and to sell it for marketing purposes. In particular, the global Olympic industry provides the means to pursue neoliberal city reconstruction. At a local level, the nature of the myth compelled the government to deregulate and

privatize in order to incorporate new urban capital while casting such policies as necessary for Chinese development, harmony and betterment of all.

The city image issues are complicated and deeply intertwined with every aspect of Chinese life. This investigation has highlighted the importance of situating urban issues in the larger social and economic context. My research has demonstrated how official representations of Beijing's city image obfuscated social conflicts and class struggles in contemporary Chinese society.

In Castells's (1977) view, urban issues should examine "how the city changes...under the conflict process in social groups," and urban problems should be linked with "other forms of conflict with those arising from the productive system and from political struggle" (p. 378). I focused on the city image issue because it lies at the crossroads of Chinese economic development, Chinese social problems, and Chinese peoples' resistance. In Harvey's (1972) view, the city is a spatial form for the concentration and circulation of capital and is also an arena for class struggles. Chinese neoliberalism has created the context for city governments to collude with private developers to promote city regeneration and construction projects. In particular, land policies which reorganized and re-allocated different social resources, generated and intensified many social problems and contradictions. In short, the official city image was employed as part of a broader neoliberal economic strategy emphasizing deregulation and privatization in the Chinese context.

Of course, resistance to these changes is still being articulated. Urban regeneration projects continue to be met with opposition as the rights of more and



more people are cast aside or trampled upon in the name of economic “progress.” While people like Zhang Jinli from Meishi Street use banners to express their anger, others have chosen more drastic measures, including self-immolation to draw attention to the rapidly growing economic inequalities in China. Others have tried to harness the potential of the internet to express their discontent; in some cases such efforts have been brutally quashed by the government.

Many promises were made to ordinary Beijing residents about the benefits of hosting an Olympic Games. One can now see that many of those promises remain unfulfilled. It is certainly true that some, particularly the elite, have benefitted handsomely, yet the majority have not. One is reminded here of a quote from Jane Jacobs which I believe encapsulates what was done by the Chinese and Beijing governments and corporate interests and how it has affected the city of Beijing and its peoples. It seems like an apt ending to my thesis: “Here are men that alter their neighbour’s landmark...shoulder the poor aside, conspire to oppress the friendless. Reap the field that is none of theirs, strip they the vineyard wrongfully seized from its owner... a cry goes up from the city streets where wounded men lie groaning...” (Jacobs, 1989).

## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

## List of Abbreviations

BOCOG	Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad
IOC	International Olympics Committee
COHRE	Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
BOBICO	Beijing 2008 Olympic Games Bid Committee
TVEs	Township and Village Enterprises
SOEs	State-Owned Enterprises
IOC	International Olympic Committee
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
RMB	Renminbi, official currency of the People's Republic of China (P.R.C.)

## Appendix B

## List of Tables

Table 1 : Paradigmatic and syntagmatic form of *Charming Beijing*

Syntagmatic	Parts	Time	Paradigmatic
	head leader	00:00-00:06	Great wall, Chinese painting, tourists, Chinese Wushu, Traditional opera
	Scenes	00:06-00:12	Title: <i>Charming Beijing</i>
	early in the morning	00:13-01:13	Great wall, Forbidden city, Heaven temple, Summer Palace, lake, green trees etc.
	early in the morning	01:13-01:35	Lantern, <i>Hutong</i> , Square yard, the elderly people
	later in the morning	01:35-01:50	Fan dance, skipping rope, kicking shuttlecock, football
	later in the morning	01:50-02:03	buying the silk(foreigners), playing with puppy (young lady), Chinese style marriage
	later in the morning	02:03-02:44	riding bicycle(passing by Tiananmen Square), Hip-Hop(younger), kites, folk dance, basketball, leap frog, football
	later in the morning	02:44-02:55	Beijing Duck, hotel
	Noon	02:55-03:21	skyscraper ,highway, policeman, subway, shopping mall, auto show

	Noon	03:21-03:38	Kite, Olympic flag, Chinese athletes, riding bicycle, hurdle, gymnastics
	Evening	03:38-05:00	Beijing opera, Wushu, festival lantern ,China, handwriting, embroider, Herb, cheongsam, fashion show, jade, tea, dumping Jacky Cheung, Chinese painting
	Evening	05:00-05:55	Beijing night scenes, ballet, piano, opera, dragon dance, party, fireworks, symphony
	the ending	05:55-06:00	Title: <i>Charming Beijing</i>

Table 2 : Paradigmatic and syntagmatic form of *Meishi Street*

Synagmatic	Time	Paradigmatic
	Head 00:03:10	Morning street scene: a sanitation worker is cleaning street, a small restaurant is opening, and street boys are playing with the sand on construction sites.
	00:03:10-00:03:25	The actor Zhang Jinli is climbing up from a cloacae.
	00:03:25-00:04:25	A notice on the wall: For local residents, Beijing government only would like to discuss demolition, other things cannot be negotiated.
	00:04:25-00:05:44	Zhang Jinlin is hanging a red banner on the roof. The banner shows: the private developer falsified agreements, the neighborhood office and its director administrate <i>Hutong</i> illegally. Vulnerable residents are hard to survive.
	00:05:44-00:06:22	Meishi Street Panorama: demolition across half of the

	street.
00:07:27-00:12:00	Residents gather Zhang Jinli's home are discussing unfair policy of demolition.
00:10:21-00:12:00	Zhang Jinli use DV to record his daily life
00:14:32-00:14:37	Government banner: Relocating people in strict according with the law promoting preservation of neighbor.
00:14:37-00:16:15	Zhang Jinli's room, old family pictures, and sue letter
00:17:41-00:21:17	Resident Suntiesheng and his wife are complaining the compensation. The half of their house has become a ruin.
00:21:17-00:23:01	Zhang Jinli banner: the government abuses its power and demolishes houses by force in the daylight, plunder resident's private property. There are no avenues for the people to appeal only a road to ruin. City governors take off the banner.
00:23:01-00:23:40	Government banner: actively support city reconstruction project, support the city image project, strengthen urban management
00:23:40-00:26:22	Zhang Jinli's banner: promotion and removal by the Bureau of Land Resources in unreasonable.
00:26:22-00:29:25	Zhang Jinli singing on the roof. The city governors force him stop singing and take off the banner.
00:29:25-00:31:00	Zhang Jinli is talking with his daughter about budget of demolition in his small restaurant.
00:31:45-00:32:18	Zhang Jinli do morning exercises
00:32:18-00:37:29	The ruins on the Meishi street
00:40:08-00:42:06	Zhang Jinli shows an appeal letter, and look into law books

00:44:03-00:44:38	The process of demolition of Zhang Jinli's neighbor houses
00:44:38-00:46:10	The house of Mr. Suntiasheng is tore down
00:47:50-00:50:13	Residents' banner on the wall: District government supports illegal demolition and removal.
00:50:13-00:53:07	The Chinese lunar new year. The governors are patrolling on the street.
00:55:00-00:55:53	New Year banners on the door: hegemony, power, and law
00:58:41-01:00:03	Zhang's banner: demolition against national law
01:00:03-01:02:37	The house of the resident Liu Ruiping is demolishing. She is crying: the governor abuse power, and tyrannize the common people.
01:04:50-01:08:10	Chairman Mao's picture on the wall and banner next to the Mao's photos: against illegal demolition
01:08:10-01:08:48	The city governor get rid of all posters and banners
01:08:48-01:09:45	Zhang Jinli is singing: we grew up on this every spot and hold claim to every inch of land and whoever dress snatch it from us. We will fight to the very end.
01:09:45-01:14:00	The scene of the demolition
01:14:00-01:23:15	The process of demolition of Zhang Jinli's house Cranes, trailers, the Public Security Bureau officers, Zhang is forced to sign on an agreement, and his home and his restaurant are demolished
01:23:15	The end

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