

## **Beijing 2008 Cultural Festivals: Bigger, but not always better<sup>i</sup>**

**Beatriz Garcia**

**The gigantism of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games was mirrored in the ambition of its cultural programme, though the nuance of its delivery is a more intricate story, where its vast investment into cultural activity and people's involvement did not seem to achieve the level of profile that it might have expected.**

This, of course, is not an unusual story. However, in China's case, there are some unique paradoxes that make the experience of the Beijing's Games of particular significance to future research on the Olympic Cultural programme.

Cultural programming within the Olympics has a long history that goes back to the origins of the modern Olympic Movement and Pierre de Coubertin's ideal of a marriage between sport and art. However, it is one of the aspects of the Games that remains obscured, the challenges of which are matched only by its capacity to confound local and

international stakeholders. Olympic Arts Festivals and Cultural Olympiads have progressed over almost 100 years, achieving various degrees of success and complexity, as expressions of the identity and creativity of respective hosts. Yet, they are always doomed by their incapacity to attract media attention and ensure public understanding and engagement.

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President Jacques Rogge at the opening of the Olympic Fine Art exhibition, Beijing 2008.

Since being awarded the Games, Beijing followed the model established by Barcelona in 1992 and proposed a multi-annual cultural programme in the lead to the two weeks of Olympic sport competition in 2008. However, it decided to go beyond the four-year Cultural Olympiad period (covering the end of one Games to the start of the next), and launched its first 'Olympic Cultural Festival' in 2003, during the Athens Olympiad. In total, Beijing hosted six Olympic cultural festivals, lasting one month each until 2007. The original description of these festivals was that of a

"cultural gala ... held annually to mark the anniversary of Beijing's successful bid for the 2008 Games and help promote the Olympic movement in the city".

The festivals are defined as a "platform for Beijing to showcase its preparation for the Olympic Games, such as unveiling its Olympic slogan and Olympic mascots", which is complemented by "[v]arious events including concerts, photo exhibitions, dance performances and Olympic forums take place." Thus, in contrast to previous hosts, which have interpreted the Cultural Olympiad as a separate programme of (mainly) arts activity, Beijing treated it as a central vehicle to promote the Games at large and used the mainstream channels of Olympic communication, such as the BOCOG site to achieve this. Further, Beijing used the Festivals

to involve Chinese communities at a national level, via a series of National Song contests, involving the creation of songs inspired by the Olympics. Every year, winners of these competitions would be invited to perform in Beijing during the Festival itself, within sold-out extravagant ceremonial parties.



Olympic Fine Art exhibition, Beijing 2008.

In 2008, Beijing expanded the period of delivery for the programme, from June to September, and developed an international and national strand of work. Notably, the 2008 programme was promoted by the top ranks of Chinese Olympic and cultural administration – in particular, the Chinese IOC member, Zheliang HE, chairman of the IOC Commission of Culture and Education since 2000 and Chairman of its preceding Culture Commission since 1995. The 2008 programme incorporated an international Olympic Fine Arts competition, the largest of its kind ever staged, which was opened during the Olympic Games by the current

IOC president, Jacques Rogge, and IOC honorary president Juan Antonio Samaranch. Other elements included a sold out performing arts programme and visual arts programme, presented at the most prestigious Beijing venues.

Beijing tried, for the first time of any Games, to incorporate all 'cultural aspects' of the Games under the umbrella of its official cultural programme. As such, beyond arts, design and mainstream Olympic promotions, it also incorporated the increasingly popular Olympic Cultural Squares, which Sydney had staged in 2000, under the name of 'Live Sites' and as a separate entity to its arts festival.



Coca Cola Square, Beijing 2008

From six sites in Sydney, Beijing went up to 24 sites which, not only included the expected large TV screens showcasing live sport competitions, but also cultural exhibitions and larger-than-life sponsor displays. This all encompassing cultural programme was listed in detail within the 200plus page 'Culture

Guide', which featured quite prominently within the official BOCOG site and media information centres in the lead and during Games time (at the time of writing, BOCOG's home page do still feature a direct link to the Guide.

Certainly, on paper and by examining the official Olympic websites, Beijing's Olympic cultural programme was impressive and far more visible than had been the case in previous Games editions. For instance, despite the ambition of the Athens 2004 Cultural Olympiad, its promotion was mainly unrelated to the Athens 2004 Organizing Committee (ATHOC) delivery channels so it was perceived as a completely separate programme. Yet, the lived experience of the Beijing cultural programme faced similar and, in some cases, new challenges to those of previous Olympic hosts.

The first limitation was the lack of visible information outside the virtual world. The extensive Culture Guide was not physically available to the average Olympic tourist – particularly, within Olympic volunteer information points, which were ubiquitous throughout Beijing. Instead, the Guide was only made available within Olympic Family environments or through the web. This meant that those 'in the know' had certainly access to detailed information, but those not expecting (or searching for) a

cultural programme were left unaware.

The second limitation related to the uses of public space to present cultural activities. Given the integration of all Olympic cultural offer within the same official programme, an attractive way to reach out to the average visitor would have been through the Olympic cultural squares. Indeed, one of the major learning points from previous Games and aspirations for future Games, was to deliver Live sites - which have become the main hubs of public celebration - in a way that is integrated with the broader cultural agenda. However, the cultural squares of Beijing failed to attract the kinds of crowds that were anticipated, judging by the size of these venues and apparent investment.



Neon and flower displays at Tiananmen Square, Beijing 2008.

In contrast, other central spaces, such as Tiananmen Square and other established tourist sites, were full of people, almost overcrowded, and offered the kind of environment that is

expected during Games time – a kitsch combination of local heritage and global meta-space, characterised by loudly bright uniforms (national sport delegations, Olympic sponsor tours, Chinese community groups and all kinds of fan dress codes), an overload of (officially approved) patriotic symbols and relentless smiling, chanting and cheering.

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In short, the lesson from Beijing appears to be that the carefully programmed cultural squares, which were technically ideal from a cultural programming perspective, did not resonate with the Games time zeitgeist – nobody wanted to be in those spaces, instead being drawn to the more symbolic areas of the city, regardless of the availability of a big screen. As such, with very few exceptions, the officially designated Squares were deserted for most of the day. Local groups preferred to watch the Games in private with their families, while visitors struggled to understand how to access the sites, located as they were within vast parks or requiring the previous obtainment of (free) tickets for entry.

Finally, as has been the case in every previous Olympic edition, the largest challenge for the Beijing culture programme to be

considered a relevant dimension of the Games, was the lack of media profiling at an international level. In China, this state of affairs was also idiosyncratic for two reasons.



Journalist interviewing outside the Beijing 2008 Aquatic Centre, Beijing 2008.

First, the local media offered extensive coverage of populist cultural practices, which is atypical. Second, CCTV9, the sole international Chinese broadcaster in English, which would be the only English language media source for most foreign visitors in China, gave extensive coverage to the mainstream aspects of the cultural programme to cover for the fact that it was not allowed to showcase the official sport competition venues due to right holding restrictions. This meant that the cultural programme received unprecedented levels of broadcast attention from a Chinese perspective, however it still failed to reach out and attract the non-Chinese TV channels, thus a true international audience.

Of course, these details do not really offer much in the way of learning for subsequent Games, but they do reveal how, with even the most meticulous planning and extensive financial investment, the resulting Games time cultural experience can find its success determined by anomalous, local issues and finding a way of anticipating these requires extensive expertise within cultural planning. So, it's probably just as well that London is not planning to match Beijing's gigantism. Expect greater emphasis on grassroots involvement and less on grand cultural venues. Expect more emphasis on the human scale of cultural experience and less on full-on arts extravaganzas. Perhaps this will still fail to attract the attention of the international media. But at least it may provide some meaningful first hand experiences to those directly involved – and it may surprise the Olympic visitor that has traditionally assumed cultural programming to be the exclusive domain of opera houses and indoor art galleries.

The experiment for London starts at the end of September 2008, with yet another four-year Cultural Olympiad.

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