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Unequal cities of spectacle and mega-events in China

Hyun Bang Shin

This paper revisits China's recent experiences of hosting three international mega-events: the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, the 2010 Shanghai World Expo and the 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games. While maintaining a critical political economic perspective, this paper builds upon the literature of viewing mega-events as societal spectacles and puts forward the proposition that these mega-events in China are promoted to facilitate capital accumulation and ensure socio-political stability for the nation's further accumulation. The rhetoric of a 'Harmonious Society' as well as patriotic slogans are used as key languages of spectacles in order to create a sense of unity through the consumption of spectacles, and pacify social and political discontents rising out of economic inequalities, religious and ethnic tensions, and urban–rural divide. The experiences of hosting mega-events, however, have shown that the creation of a 'unified', 'harmonious' society of spectacle is built on displacing problems rather than solving them.

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Key words: mega-events, spectacles, accumulation, nationalism, China

Between 2001 and 2004, China's national population was captivated by the news of three international mega-events awarded to its major cities: the 2008 Summer Olympic Games to Beijing, the 2010 World Expo to Shanghai and finally the 2010 Summer Asian Games to Guangzhou. Hosted by the three most influential and affluent cities in mainland China, these three spectacles came to dominate the top urban and regional development policy agendas in the coming years of preparation. This paper is largely concerned with scrutinising these mega-event spectacles, discussing what role they might have played in China. The paper particularly draws on Guy Debord's Society of Spectacle (1967, 1988), and tries to reinterpret what it would mean in contemporary urban China contexts.

For many decades, mega-events such as the Olympic Games have been largely the exclusive domain of cities from the developed Western world. For instance, apart from the three Summer Olympiads in Tokyo (1964), Mexico City (1968) and Seoul (1988), all other Games until 2004 were held in Western cities. As for the World Expo that was first held in London in 1851, it was also dominated by the industrial West until the 1970s, after which Japan and subsequently South Korea came to host some of the latest expositions. In line with the post-Fordist transition of major Western economies and the concentration of mega-events in post-industrial cities, mega-events have been regarded as playing an instrumental role of spurring the consumption-based economic development (Burbank *et al.*, 2001). This involved the provision of sporting complexes, convention centres, entertainment facilities and supporting infrastructure, while it was hoped that the expected international recognition of host cities would also raise their global

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profile in the quest for mobile capital (Short, 2008). Central government grants were also frequently regarded as being a major motif behind mega-event promotion by cities that experienced fiscal problems (Andranovich *et al.*, 2001; Cochrane *et al.*, 1996).

Did China's mega-events provide similar experiences as in the West? What would be the significance of these events for China? Discussions of mega-events in the developing world tend to focus on the role of mega-events in raising the host city's profile in international relations or in addressing particular agendas in national politics (for example, see Van der Westhuizen, 2004; Steenveld and Strelitz, 1998; Black, 2007). More socially oriented attention has often highlighted detrimental impacts on the urban poor as part of beautification projects to transform host cities' urban landscape (Bhan, 2009; Greene, 2003; Newton, 2009). While maintaining a critical political economic perspective, this paper attempts to build upon the emerging literature of viewing mega-events as societal spectacles (see Broudehoux, 2010; Gotham, 2011) and puts forward the proposition that these mega-events in China are promoted as a means to create 'unified space' (Debord, 1967) for the purpose of both capital accumulation and socio-political stability for further accumulation. This paper argues that this creation of 'unified space' is an attempt to pacify social and political discontents rising out of economic inequalities, religious and ethnic tensions, and urban–rural divide. The rhetoric of a 'Harmonious Society' and the 'Glory of the Motherland', as put forward by the top leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, has become the key language of spectacles. The experiences of hosting mega-events, however, have shown that the creation of a 'unified', 'harmonious' society of spectacle is built on displacing problems rather than solving them.

Mega-events and China's cities of spectacle

Awarding the 2008 Olympic Games host city status to Beijing was shortly before the accession of China to the World Trade Organization in September 2001. While the Olympic Games itself was awarded to Beijing, it was received as an award to the whole nation. In particular, the winning of the host city status was a compensation for China's previous dramatic loss[1] to Sydney in the bid competition for the 2000 Summer Olympiad back in 1993. The timing of this 1993 competition could not have been worse for China, which was just coming out of the standstill of economic reform policies after the violent crackdown on democracy movements in 1989. Its vivid memory formed the basis of many international human rights organisations' fierce opposition to awarding the Olympiad to China at the time.

The subsequent bid for the 2008 Summer Olympic Games came with the changing international atmosphere. Instead of imposing democratisation as a pre-condition of awarding the Games to Beijing, more support was garnered for using the Games as an instrument of facilitating democracy in China (Close *et al.*, 2007). The experience of South Korea was often cited as a preceding example: it was thought that the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games acted as a catalyst to South Korea's democratisation in the mid-1980s, partly due to the global pressure on the regime through its intense media exposure (Black and Bezanson, 2004). China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 and the success of the 2008 Olympic bid gave a further signal to the international community that China was becoming more integrated with the world. The results were subsequent successes with Shanghai's bid for the 2010 World Exposition in December 2002 and Guangzhou's for the 2010 Summer Asian Games in July 2004.

China's mega-event troika all took place during the three-year period between 2008 and 2010: the temporal concentration of these major international mega-events in China created urban spectacles that went beyond the host cities and reached the whole nation. For China, however, spectacles were not entirely new in its modern era. Not

so long ago in the 1960s and 1970s, the entire country was engulfed in the fervour of the Cultural Revolution, which involved popular movements and the intense mobilisation of revolutionary slogans, political campaigns and violence to launch a 'class war' against so-called revisionists. Guy Debord himself refers to China's experience when elaborating on his discussion of the 'concentrated spectacle', which is associated with the constant use of violence (for instance, under fascism) and iconic political leaders as reifications of spectacular moments (1967).

> 'Its spectacle imposes an image of the good which subsumes everything that officially exists, an image which is usually concentrated in a single individual, the guarantor of the system's totalitarian cohesion. Everyone must magically identify with this absolute star or disappear. This master of everyone else's nonconsumption is the heroic image that disguises the absolute exploitation entailed by the system of primitive accumulation accelerated by terror. If the entire Chinese population has to study Mao to the point of identifying with Mao, this is because there is *nothing else they can be*.' (Debord, 1967, p. 50)

Guy Debord's arguments about the society of spectacle suggest the rise of a society where the 'social relation between people ... is mediated by images' (1967, p. 24) and where lived reality is subordinated to and aligned with images that falsify the reality (p. 25). Spectacles function 'as a *means of unification*' by creating 'delusion and false consciousness' among otherwise isolated and separate individuals (p. 24). What is being created is a 'type of pseudocommunity' that conceals separation in reality (p. 116). Debord's subsequent commentaries on the society of spectacle in his 1988 publication argued for the qualitative transformation of the society into that of 'integrated spectacle': this was a dialectic synthesis of the diffuse and concentrated spectacles, with a heavier weight given to the more victorious 'diffuse spectacle' (Debord, 1988). The domination of 'integrated spectacle' in late capitalist economies dictates that individual life be consumed by the immense accumulation of spectacles, while the use of violent measures is to aid the domination of this status quo. The use of violence as the state power is justified by the identification of external threats such as terrorism.

The strengthening importance of images and spectacles corresponds to the changing accumulation needs and strategies in contemporary cities especially in the post-industrial West (Hall, 1994). Place marketing and branding cities have come to be an important tool for urban development aimed at attracting investors and tourists (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005). The recent popularity of celebrity architects and their products for city marketing could also be understood along this line (Knox, 2012). Mega-events such as the Olympic Games would mesh all these into an ensemble, producing spectacular images as well as spectacular urban spaces to meet the hosting requirements of such events and maximise host cities' potential (and largely economic) gains. Under these circumstances, mega-events as urban spectacles have gained an increasing degree of popularity among urban elites as a means of staging cities in the world (Short, 2008).

A handful of preceding works on mega-events resort to the use of Guy Debord's Society of Spectacle framework. For instance, Kevin Gotham (2005, 2011) examines the US experiences of hosting urban festivals and the world fair to discuss the extent to which mega-events that functioned as a means to conceal inherent social inequalities could also operate as 'spectacles of contestation', giving rise to the formation of resistant agendas. Anne-Marie Broudehoux (2007) also discusses how urban spectacles such as the Olympic Games accompanied the construction of spectacular monumental architecture at the expense of cheap migrant labour and land confiscation. Her latest work also includes the pre-eminence of spectacular architecture, which serves the

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need of regulating the society through disseminating particular images of China (Broudehoux, 2010). The underlying theme of these preceding works is the extent to which spectacles play the role of falsifying realities.

While it is important to understand how spectacles conceal realities and at the same time conceive resistance, it would also be essential to examine why spectacles are increasingly sought after by China's local and central states. One of the explanations, which this paper accentuates, is the spectacle's additional function of promoting a dialectic process of (a) aiding the creation of a 'unified space' (Debord, 1967, p. 114) to enable accumulation and profit-led commodity production, and (b) promoting 'a controlled reintegration' of isolated individuals to the governing system in order to address 'planned needs of production and consumption' (in other words, accumulation needs). This reintegration is not to salvage people from isolation and separation, but to bring 'isolated individuals together as *isolated individuals*', while the isolation is filled 'with the ruling images' (p. 116). This function of spectacle as addressing accumulation needs was briefly taken up by Julie Guthman (2008) in her short editorial piece on 'accumulation by spectacle', regarded as one of the 'teachable moments' that could be learnt from the observation of the Beijing Olympic Games.

In this regard, this paper accentuates the spectacle's function of aiding capital accumulation through the examination of China's experiences of hosting the Olympic Games, the World Expo and the Asian Games. The next section discusses how the preparation for spectacles contributed to the accumulation needs of host cities through spatial restructuring and investment in the built environment. Then, in the ensuing section, the paper will examine how the sense of 'pseudo-community' feeling was promoted by the state through the use of particular languages, which meant to create the sense of unity through the consumption of spectacles.

Spectacles and accumulation

In their discussion on American cities' experiences of hosting the Olympic Games, Burbank *et al.* (2001) frame mega-events as facilitating the development of a 'consumption-oriented economy', which focuses on creating places (convention centres, theme parks and sports complexes) for visitors' pursuit of pleasure. Through the deployment of regime politics that bring together local business interests and financially weak local governments, mega-events are thought to contribute to the promotion of local entrepreneurial activities for the survival and growth of host cities in the increasingly competitive global and domestic market (ibid.). While such propositions have some potential to explain mega-events hosted in post-industrial cities of the West, it is questionable how they would apply to the examination of mega-event experiences in rapidly industrialising emerging economies such as China. While local state entrepreneurialism explains the ascendancy of major Chinese cities in the global market, China is also noted for its authoritarian strong state that emphasises political centralisation under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (Wu, 2003; Chien, 2010). In this regard, the recent experiences of hosting mega-events in China are integrated with China's larger political economic projects, while the resulting place-specific accumulation strategies have been led by the local states under the auspices of the central state.

The three mega-events in China took place in three cities that had been leading China's rapidly developing economies and its regions. They also represented core industrial regional clusters: Beijing representing the Beijing–Tianjin–Tangshan region, Shanghai, the Yangtze River Delta region and finally Guangzhou, the Pearl River Delta region. These mega-city regions are the key areas for implementing China's latest regional development strategies organised by the Chinese central government. Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, as centres of these

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mega-city regions, are the sites of capital accumulation and the commanding centres of their respective regions, though the formation and development of these mega-city regions may accompany continuous negotiations and territorial conflicts (Ma, 2005; Xu and Yeh, forthcoming). Under these circumstances, the three mega-events could be regarded as having presented host cities with an opportunity to consolidate their economic and political achievements at both regional and national scales, while facilitating their pursuit to become 'world-class' cities in particular. To some extent, these goals tend to align with the central state's national and international ambition. This would have been particularly the case for Beijing and Shanghai, while for Guangzhou, the central state influence might have been less influential, given the regional (Asian rather than global) scale of the mega-event itself and the position of Guangzhou in the national politics.[2]

One of the ways in which mega-events as contributing to capital accumulation could be seen in the promotion of fixed assets investment in host cities is through spending on urban infrastructure and redevelopment. Looking at the Games finance, one of Beijing's high-ranking officials claimed that about 15 billion yuan were direct spending on Games-related venue preparation and Games operation, while 280 billion yuan were spent on infrastructure projects including expanding public transport networks such as new metro lines (see Shin, 2009, p. 138).[3] This is almost equivalent to Beijing's total urban fixed assets investment in 2006 (308.6 billion yuan), and amounts to a little less than one-third (31.6%) of the total urban fixed assets investment between 2005 and 2007 when the preparation for the Olympics intensified (Beijing Municipal Statistics Bureau, 2011).

As for Guangzhou, the provision of its public facilities also received the greatest emphasis. It was reported that the original estimate of the Asian Games-related expenditure, as proclaimed by Guangzhou Mayor Wan Qingliang, was 122.6 billion yuan: this included the expenditure on Games operation costs, but nearly 90% was reportedly invested in infrastructure and urban redevelopment projects. Unofficial figures speculated by a senior representative at the Guangzhou People's Congress showed an even higher estimate of 257.7 billion yuan as the total investment to host the Asian Games spectacle (*Shenzhen Daily*, 2011; *Times of India*, 2011): this was almost equivalent to Guangzhou's total urban fixed assets investment in 2009 (Guangdong Statistics Bureau, 2011). Even if we took the conservative figure from the government, it again suggested that the investment in infrastructure and urban redevelopment was far more important than the Games itself, and assumed a substantial share in the city's total fixed assets investment. A similar story could be repeated for Shanghai that reportedly spent about US$45 billion on preparing the city for 'the biggest and most expensive party' (*Guardian*, 2010b).

The role of mega-events in triggering urban accumulation is further demonstrated by their influence on host cities' spatial restructuring. A couple of key examples are presented here. In Guangzhou, the Asian Games preparation became instrumental to Guangzhou's long-term development goals of constructing growth centres, one of which is the Guangzhou New Town (hereafter GNT), located in the centre of Panyu district that received an increasing degree of government attention for Guangzhou's southward expansion. The GNT was designated as one of the two growth cores (the other being the Tianhe New Town) by the municipal government when it laid out spatial development strategic plans immediately after Guangzhou's successful bid for the Asian Games. The GNT was to be developed on a planned area of 30 square kilometres in the rural fringe area of Panyu district, adopting a 'new town construction' strategy. It was located about 25 kilometres to the south from the new central business district in the Tianhe New Town, and about

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12 kilometres south-east from the Guangzhou Higher Education Mega Center (also known as Guangzhou University Town). The GNT would be regarded as one of the pivotal projects for the urbanisation of Panyu district. The Asian Games preparation made it possible for the GNT to see the first phase of its development through the positioning of the 2.73-square-kilometre (nearly equivalent to the combined size of Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens in London) Asian Games village in the GNT centre's north-eastern corner. The construction of the Asian Games village was to involve real estate projects by developers who acquired 30-year rights to manage facilities and sell commercial houses.

The development of the Asian Games village also testified to Guangzhou's interest in using metro line development to lead the urbanisation process, adopting Hong Kong's transit-oriented development (Cervero and Murakami, 2009) that makes use of the combination of rail and property development as a means to finance infrastructure construction. You-tien Hsing in her discussion of new town development in Nanjing also reports a similar development strategy applied there (2010, p. 107). The municipal expropriation of farmland for conversion into urban construction land accompanied the installation of infrastructure and a public transport network such as metro connections in order to maximise development gains by attracting potential developers and increasing land use premium. As for the construction of the Asian Games village, the Line No. 4 connection to the village site at Haibang, Panyu district, was already completed by the end of 2006 (New Guangdong, 2006). This predated the actual construction of the Asian Games village, which commenced only in mid-2008 (see Figure 1). In addition to this, Guangzhou invested heavily in metro line construction, either new lines or existing line extensions, before the Asian Games. During the six-year period of preparing for the Summer Asiad, Guangzhou reportedly invested 70 billion yuan in metro construction, the total length of metro lines having expanded to 236 kilometres (*People's Daily Online*, 2010). This was a considerable increase, given the reality that as of the end of 2003, a few months before the city was awarded the Asian Games, Guangzhou was in possession of two metro lines in operation (one of them in test running) whose combined line length reached only 41.6 kilometres (Guangzhou Net, 2005).[4]

The experience of Shanghai's selection of the World Expo site also demonstrates how the city strategically set its eyes on facilitating further redevelopment of central districts of Shanghai that increasingly faced land supply constraints. The site was a waterfront area, located about six kilometres to the south of the Shanghai Bund. Divided into two parts by the Huangpu River, the site was largely a combination of industrial and residential uses, having accommodated various industrial and power plants, warehouses and shipyards for China's oldest shipbuilding company. The 5.28-square-kilometre planned construction area (1.5 times the size of New York Central Park) also included residential neighbourhoods whose total population amounted to about 18,000 households according to government sources (Shanghai Municipal Planning and Land Resources, 2005). In order to empty the site for Expo construction, these residents were all subject to displacement from 2005 in the name of fulfilling public interests (see Figure 2). The latest plan for the development of the World Expo site was announced in March 2011, and included a combination of commercial, business, culture and high-end residential uses (*People's Daily Online*, 2011). In fact, the hosting of the Shanghai World Expo enabled the city to assemble a massive site for future development purposes, creating another potential growth pole in the south of Shanghai's historic inner-city districts. This would lead to a substantial increase in the supply of urban construction land for development, especially when Shanghai's total supply of land in 2010

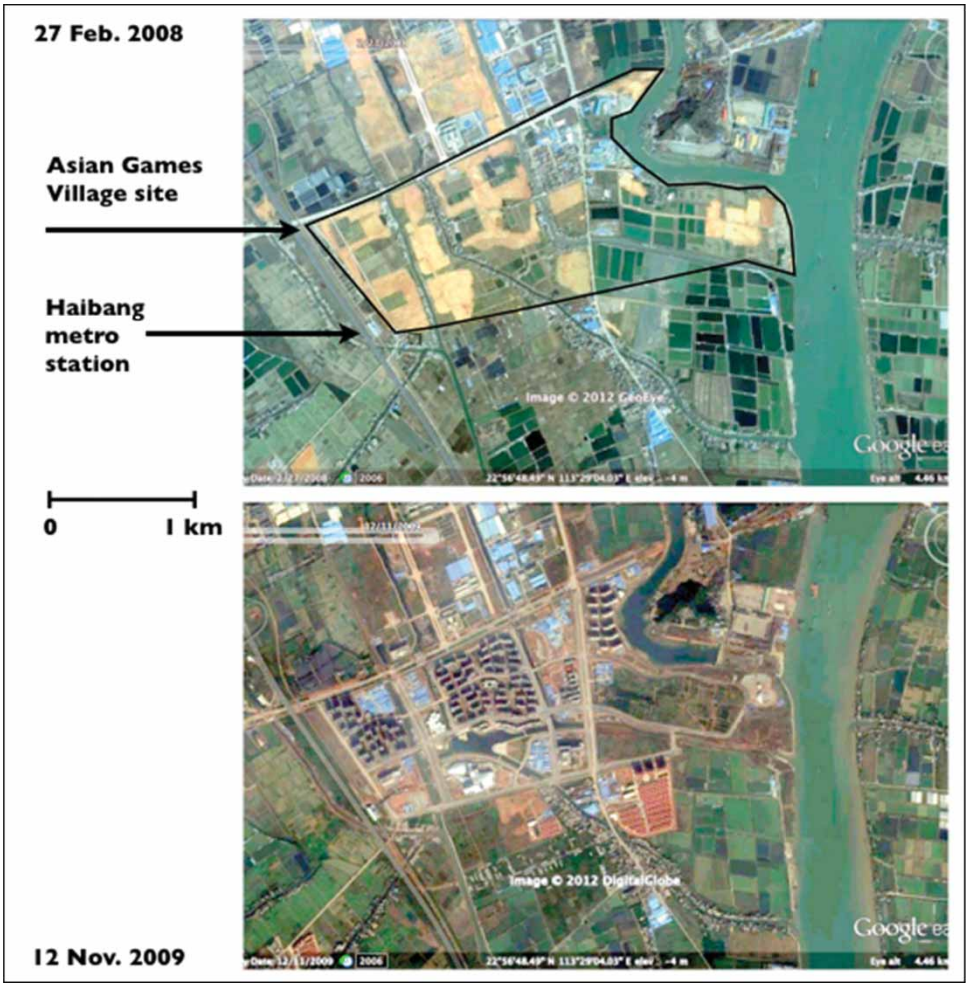

Figure 1 Cleared sites (2008) and construction of the Asian Games village (2009)
(Source: Original satellite images from Google Earth. Images © 2012 Google, © 2012 GeoEye and © 2012 DigitalGlobe)

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reached around 8.42 square kilometres (*Shanghai Daily*, 2011).

Spectacles and the rhetoric of a Harmonious Society

The social division of labour based on the concentration of the means of production in the hands of a few has produced isolated individuals and over time aggravated inequalities in sharing the outcome of social production. In order for capital accumulation to continue under these circumstances, social and political stability becomes a pre-condition: when stability is not found, it needs to be created even by force. This is where spectacles become a powerful instrument. As for China, urban spectacles came to be mobilised as a means to consolidate the Chinese party-state's legitimacy in the midst of rising economic, political and social costs resulting from China's decades-long endeavour to develop a market economy.

Economically, while the reform measures have resulted in the phenomenal growth of China's economy and substantially reduced absolute poverty, aggravating income and

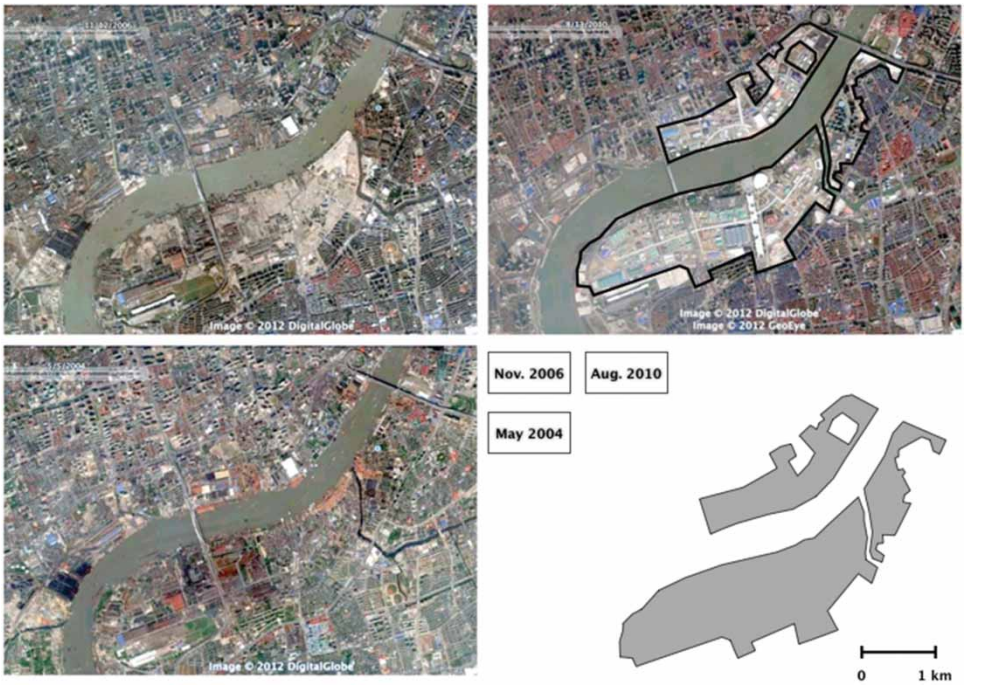

Figure 2 Shanghai Expo site's transition over time: 2004 (pre-demolition), 2006 (demolition in progress) and 2010 (completed)
(Source: Original satellite images from Google Earth. Images © 2012 Google © 2012 DigitalGlobe and © 2012 GeoEye)

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wealth inequalities have come to be a major source of concern for the governments. Reports suggest that urban China had seen worsening income inequalities, which resulted from regional income dispersion as well as the large-scale unemployment from the industrial restructuring of the 1990s (Meng, 2004). The country's income disparity as measured by the Gini coefficient was said to have increased from 0.33 in 1980 to 0.46 twenty years later, mainly due to the widening rural–urban income gap (Chang, 2002).[5] Inter- and intra-regional inequalities became acute especially from the mid-1980s when reform measures began to deepen (Kanbur and Zhang, 2005). Regional disparities were prominent especially due to the wealth accumulated more rapidly in eastern coastal provinces (Dunford and Li, 2010), which benefited heavily from the early reform policies of 'Get Rich First' and the establishment of special economic zones. Urban areas also saw wealth accumulation at a much faster rate than in rural areas (ibid.). The eastern coastal region therefore saw a much higher proportion of China's newly emerging super-rich than other regions: according to the Hurun Wealth Report for 2011, the number of China's millionaires whose estimated assets were worth more than RMB 10 million reached 960,000, located mostly in the eastern region such as Beijing (170,000), Guangdong (157,000), Shanghai (132,000) and Zhejiang (126,000) (*China Daily*, 2011).

Politically, while calls for greater 'rule of law' have been mounting, the aggravating regional disparities are compounded by the religious and ethnic tensions centred around the separatist movements in Tibet and Xinjiang autonomous areas in particular. These areas saw frequent violent protests and brutal oppressions. Such tensions had been arguably caused by 'the systemic violation

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of basic rights and insensitivity toward minority identities by the state', further provoked by the narrow range of central state responses to such ethnic and religious conflicts (Acharya *et al.*, 2010, pp. 1–2). Gladney associates the rise of ethnic tensions with the enactment of 'internal colonialism' that aimed at assimilating subaltern ethnic groups in the wider project of Chinese nationalism centred on the dominant Han identity (2004). Some recent examples of heightened tensions rooted in these regions include the violent conflicts that broke out in 2009 in Xinjiang, which resulted in hundreds of casualties (*Guardian*, 2009), and the deadly attack in Xinjiang's Kashgar shortly before the Beijing Olympic Games (Aljazeera, 2008).

Socially, the aforementioned urban–rural and regional disparities have come with the surge of rural-to-urban migration: the eastern coastal region was the overwhelmingly popular destination for migrants. Remittance transfer would significantly contribute to the economy in their places of origin, but their lives in destination places were confronted by hardships and disadvantages in terms of accessing welfare and social services. Entitlements to government services in particular had been increasingly shaped around local citizenship, barring migrants as outsiders from accessing them (Smart and Smart, 2001). The restructuring of welfare reforms centred on the strengthening of local citizenship tends to be promoted actively by those local governments in more affluent eastern provinces. To this extent, the migrants' unequal conditions in their destination places would be the reflection of regional disparities.

While the Beijing Olympic Games, the Shanghai World Expo and the Guangzhou Asian Games were aimed at showcasing China's economic and political power to the outside world, they were also orchestrated occasions for the Chinese central government to showcase the 'Harmonious Society' and the 'Glorious Motherland' to the domestic populace. As Ni Chen (2012) finds in a recent study on how mega-events contributed to the branding of national images, the three mega-events were propagating messages of the Chinese regime's political legitimation to the domestic audience. Nicholas Dynon (2011) also finds in his study that mega-events such as the Shanghai World Expo were a place-branding spectacle that was 'tied to an ideological narrative that is concerned ultimately not with Shanghai itself but rather with the continuing political legitimacy of the CCP [Chinese Communist Party]' (p. 195).

For instance, the Olympic Games slogans demonstrated how the Games were conceived in the domestic politics. While the proposed slogan at the time of Beijing's bid for the 2008 Olympiad was 'New Beijing, Great Olympics', the official Games slogan announced on 26 June 2005 turned out to be 'One World, One Dream' (New Guangdong, 2005). In the words of Liu Qi who was the President of the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad (hereafter BOCOG) and the former Beijing mayor, the official slogan 'expresses the firm belief of a great nation … that is committed to peaceful development, a harmonious society and people's happiness' (ibid.). This corresponded to the statement by China's President Hu Jintao who emphasised in February 2005 that 'it was important to balance the interests between different social groups, to avoid conflicts and to make sure people live safe and happy life in a politically stable country' (*China Daily*, 2005). The official Olympic slogan therefore reflected the emphasis by the top leadership on the promotion of a 'Harmonious Society' and keeping the national stability. The emphasis on a harmonious society was also visible in the official slogan of the Guangzhou Asian Games, which was 'Thrilling Games, Harmonious Asia', with a slight re-orientation towards Asia due to the regional scope of this mega-event. Banners and posters for event campaigns were deployed around Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, carrying the slogans of a

Figure 3 Guangzhou: 'Welcome the Asian Games, Enhance Civility, Build New Styles, and Promote Harmony' in Guangzhou
(Source: Author's own photograph)

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harmonious society, which became the guiding principle of nation-building throughout the period of event preparation (see Figure 3).

The event preparations in the three cities were also inundated with symbols of patriotic feeling and nationalistic sentiments that led to the glorification of being Chinese and the motherland. The opening ceremonies for these mega-events, for instance, were spectacles that amassed a series of symbolic images and performances choreographed to deliver particular patriotic and nationalist messages. At the centre of this choreography was the amelioration of ethnic tensions, touting ethnic harmony. The 2008 Olympic Games opening ceremony depicted 2008 drummers (representing the year 2008) followed by 56 children in ethnic costumes to represent China's 55 ethnic minorities and the Han ethnicity, entering the national stadium while collectively holding a Chinese flag. The ensuing performances depicted China's imperial histories and its cultural achievements, then fast-forwarded to show the future aspiration of 'One World One Dream' with China's astronauts circling around the large globe that symbolised the world. The first line of government campaign slogans for the 2008 Olympic Games was 'For the Glory of the Motherland', which came before the 'glory of the Olympic Games' (see Figure 4).

The 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games also exhibited a strong Chinese cultural dimension, in this case, southern China's Lingnan culture rooted in Guangdong province. Filled with Chinese cultural features, the Shanghai Expo opening ceremony also included the appearance of two Tibetan children who survived the April 2010 earthquake in the Tibetan area of Qinghai province shortly before the World Expo opening (Xinhua News Agency, 2010). The World Expo's China Pavilion included exhibitions of Tibet and Xinjiang, showing how the

Figure 4 Beijing: 'For the Glory of the Motherland, for the Glory of the Olympic Games, Participating in the Olympic Games, Receiving Benefits from the Olympic Games'
(Source: Author's own photograph)

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regions had developed over time under Communist Party rule and how the ethnic harmony was being achieved (Trouillaud, 2010). It hardly portrayed any signs of a violent ethnic clash, which took place only a year ago in Xinjiang and resulted in the deaths of hundreds of protesters and the exercise of martial law.

While all the slogans, ceremonies and images to be aired throughout the country and to the global audience entailed a heavy emphasis on 'Chineseness' and 'Harmonious Society', the actual preparations were very much penalising certain social groups, displacing them away from the host city's controlled urban landscape. The scale of event-related displacement of local residents appeared to be phenomenal. The Geneva-based Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (hereafter COHRE) reported that about 1.5 million Beijing residents would have been displaced during the nine years (2000–2008) leading up to the 2008 Olympic Games (COHRE, 2007). As this estimate was based on the official data from the municipal government, it was not likely to include migrants. As part of the Olympics preparation, the municipal government also proceeded with the redevelopment of a selected number of former rural villages (known as villages-in-the-city or urbanised villages), and it was estimated that about 370,500 people (four-fifths of whom would be migrants) might have been displaced before the Olympic Games (Shin, 2009, pp. 133–135). As for the Shanghai Expo, the construction of the Expo site resulted in the displacement of about 18,000 households as indicated earlier, but the municipal-wide demolition and redevelopment during the period leading up to the 2010 World Expo would have resulted in a much higher number of people subject to relocation: In total, the official statistics report that 476,246 households were subject to relocation between 2003 and 2010 (Shanghai

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Municipal Statistical Bureau, 2011, Table 17-7). Again, this figure would have underestimated the actual size of displacement, as it is likely to have excluded migrants in the estimation.

Despite the large-scale demolition and disruption to the urban social fabric in host cities, the three mega-events in China were held with minimal domestic disputes, largely aided by the immense power of the local and central states in quelling protests and disturbances. The use of tight security measures as well as the implementation of fast-tracked development projects were all carried out by the authoritarian regime under the conditions of what resembles Agamben's 'state of exception' (2003). Preventive measures such as detention or surveillance were taken to keep dissidents or protesters away from event venues and avoid any chance of public disorder from the security perspective (*New York Times*, 2008; *South China Morning Post*, 2010). The preparation for the Beijing Olympic Games also accompanied a whole series of crackdowns on beggars as well as informal traders such as street hawkers in order to keep the streets free of trouble and nuisance (*Guardian*, 2008a). Beijing also kept construction sites and factories of certain types closed as part of municipal attempts to ensure a certain degree of clean air quality, which in turn acted as a driver for migrant construction workers' departure during the Games period (*Guardian*, 2008b). Strict identity checks were carried out especially with regard to the presence of migrants. Environmental improvement as well as security, health care and sanitation were the outspoken government claims to justify these discriminatory actions. These measures of displacing local problems as a means to showcase the 'harmonious' host city of spectacle became precedents for Shanghai and Guangzhou to follow. Reports suggest that these measures were largely replicated by the Shanghai municipal government as well as Guangdong provincial and Guangzhou municipal governments in their preparation for mega-events. Guangzhou also saw tightened security measures during the period of hosting the 2010 Asian Games, and reportedly carried out the immigration crackdown on African traders and migrants whose number reached somewhere between 30,000 and 100,000 (*Guardian*, 2010a). Furthermore, it should also be noted that the heavy dosage of patriotic sentiment associated with these high-profile mega-events also made it possible for the government to win the public opinion, even those of negatively affected such as migrants (Shin and Li, 2012). The control of media by the Chinese government to produce pro-event messages also helped to produce what Lenskyj (2002) refers to as 'manufacturing consent', which further contributed to the isolation of protests and disputes.

Concluding discussion

The arrival of mega-event spectacles in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou raises the question of how spectacles have changed over time in China. The period of the Cultural Revolution that saw the domination of the 'concentrated spectacle' was long gone in the past, and the recent history is filled with the stories of economic success through the implementation of reform policies. Guy Debord's discussion of the society of spectacle reveals how urban spectacles contribute to the sustenance of capital accumulation while alienating people from exploitative realities. This insight allows us to vividly capture the role of mega-events as spectacles in China.

China's mega-event troika, that is, the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, the 2010 Shanghai World Expo and the 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games, were awarded to China at its critical moment of accumulation. Having been endorsed its re-integration with the world economy through the accession to the World Trade Organization, China embarked on a greater expansionary phase of economic development to consolidate its

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position as the factory of the world. Within China, this came with two spatial strategies. On the one hand, China's expansion was accompanied by the enhancement of its production capacities through the promotion of heavy urban and infrastructure investments by both the central and local states (Harvey, 2012, pp. 57–65). The expansion of state-led investment was particularly pronounced at the time of the 2008 global financial crisis, resulting in a massive economic stimuli package. On the other hand, the economic expansion has been supported by what David Harvey coins as 'spatial fix', which involves geographical expansion and restructuring to address the inherent contradictions of capital accumulation (Harvey, 2001). In China's regional development contexts, this requires the provision of physical infrastructure to facilitate the movement of capital, people (migrants in particular) and products within the country, hence the importance of various transport- and communication-related infrastructure (e.g. high-speed rail connection). This also raises the significance of investing in the central and western regions in search of additional markets, labour and raw materials as well as exploiting production capacities therein.

As noted earlier in this paper, the pre-condition to this accumulation strategy would be the social and political stability in these regions and in China as a whole, hence the importance of the promotion of a Harmonious Society that comes with nationalism and Chineseness. The three mega-events arrived in China when the regional disparities and social inequalities were at their highest after the implementation of reform policies, giving rise to various social and political discontents. In this regard, mega-events as spectacles aimed to ease the social and political tensions experienced by the urban poor, migrants and particularly ethnic groups centred around the western autonomous regions. The government emphasis on a Harmonious Society and its spectacular display through the mega-event preparation and hosting re-iterates Guy Debord's statement that 'The spectacle is the ruling order's nonstop discourse about itself, its never-ending monologue of self-praise, its self-portrait at the state of totalitarian domination of all aspects of life' (1967, pp. 29–30). The promotion of mega-events as spectacles has allowed the Chinese Communist Party to enforce the alignment of people's real lives in line with Party policies.

The pre-eminence of nationalism in China's politics has led critics such as Dru Gladney to speculate the possibility of nationalism emerging as 'a "unifying ideology" that will prove more attractive than communism and more manageable than capitalism' (2004, p. 365). Gladney further states, 'Any event, domestic or international, can be used as an excuse to promote nationalist goals, the building of a new unifying ideology' (ibid.). While the huge amount of investments for the mega-event preparation lays the foundation for future economic development and facilitates spatial restructuring, mega-events as spectacles also serve the function of bringing the national population under particular ideologies, and in doing so, conceal the social and political ills that the country has been suffering from. As Guy Debord succinctly puts it:

> 'The spectacle that falsifies reality is nevertheless a real product of that reality. Conversely, real life is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle, and ends up absorbing it and aligning itself with it.' (1967, p. 25)

Therefore, the mega-event troika in China could be considered as having made contributions to China's accumulation by promoting the rhetoric of a Harmonious Society and nationalism as a unifying ideology in order to ameliorate ethnic and regional conflicts, which in turn would allow the further expansion of accumulation strategies to the ethnic concentration regions in the central and western provinces without political conflicts. The central government's efforts to implement more balanced spatial development strategies seem to have produced some

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positive results with regard to reducing regional disparities from the mid-2000s in particular, even though urban–rural disparities continued to increase (Dunford and Li, 2010; Fan and Sun, 2008). However, these spatial strategies come with worrying side effects. For instance, the Go West policies in the mid-2000s to redirect state investments to the lagged western region resulted in the influx of the dominant Han population in autonomous regions of Tibet and Xinjiang in particular, which have given rise to violent conflicts in recent years. The heavy dosage of patriotic, nationalist sentiment to promote 'One China' as revealed in mega-event hosting could be interpreted as aiming at the achievement of social stability and literally a harmonious society without conflictual tensions. These will be the basis of further capital accumulation that builds upon the exploitation of migrant workers in particular and the poorer regions in the central and western regions that have largely acted as the origin of human and natural resources for the fast-developing eastern region.

At present, it is not very clear whether or not the state objectives to realise uninterrupted accumulation as well as a harmonious society will be achieved. Guy Debord (1967) highlights the dual nature of spectacle as 'at once united and divided', suggesting that 'The unity of each is based on violent divisions. But when this contradiction emerges in the spectacle, it is itself contradicted by a reversal of its meaning: the division it presents is unitary, while the unity it presents is divided.' This point about spectacles being both unitary and divided was taken up by Kevin Gotham (2011) who looks at the example of Louisiana's hosting of the 1984 World Expo to argue that mega-events are also 'spectacles of contestation', as they exhibit 'highly contradictory representations that can generate intense conflict and contestation' (p. 209). Unlike in the USA, China's social, economic and political environment does not permit the bottom-up contestation of the ruling regime to blossom in the open public sphere. Nevertheless, recent reports indicate various signs of organised or sporadic collective resistance, either hostile or peaceful, against the local states and business interests. These range from labour actions and ethnic/rural conflicts to homeowners' protests against polluting industries or forced evictions to rural villagers' rallies against land expropriation (Perry and Selden, 2003; Hsing and Lee, 2010). These moments of resistance may continue in the immediate future, given the deep societal divide that China faces. As a professor from the Renmin University of China says, 'China's current success is built on 300 million people taking advantage of 1 billion cheap laborers. And the unfair judicial system and the unfair distribution of wealth are making the challenges even greater' (*China Post*, 2010).

Spectacles may contribute to the temporary concealment of societal problems, but they are short of resolving such problems. While the top party leadership may endeavour to address those sources of social and political discontents, the roots of these discontents are so much intertwined with the reform directions that they may not be eradicated but simply displaced elsewhere, as was seen in the experiences of host cities of China's mega-event troika. While Guy Debord's formulation of an integrated spectacle in contemporary capitalist economies assumes an 'occult' controlling centre that is 'never to be occupied by a known leader, or clear ideology' (1988, p. 9), it is obvious to the bare eyes in China that the controlling centre in the country is the Chinese Communist Party. This suggests that while nationalism is clearly on the ascendency and the Party benefits from the increasing sentiment of patriotism at present, its reputation is more vulnerable to degradation when social and political discontents further accumulate in times of economic hardship. Therefore, the re-emergence of the use of spectacles in China to realise state ambitions of accumulation and stability might appear to be solid and well guarded for the time being, but

along with the time, it might turn out to have seeded greater cracks in the regulatory system.

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Notes

1 Beijing was leading Sydney until the third round of final voting, but lost to Sydney in the fourth round by a meagre two votes.
2 The relative importance and hierarchy of the three mega-events were also proven by the fact that the opening announcement for the Beijing Olympic Games and the Shanghai Expo was made by President Hu Jintao, while that for the Guangzhou Asian Games was given by Premier Wen Jiabao.
3 According to the International Monetary Fund's exchange rate archives, GBP 1 was equivalent to about 10.2224 yuan as of the end of December 2010.
4 Guangzhou Net is a website that operates as a gateway to the city information, managed by the Propaganda Bureau of the CPC Guangzhou Municipal Committee.
5 In terms of the ratio between the levels of disposable income enjoyed by the top 20% and bottom 20% of income distribution based on each city's urban household surveys, host places all experienced aggravating income inequalities. While comparable data are not available for Guangzhou, the level of income inequalities in Guangdong province as a whole rose from 3.80 in 2000 to 6.9 in 2010 (Guangdong Statistics Bureau, 2001, 2011). During the same period, Shanghai's income inequalities also rose from 2.92 to 4.17 and Beijing's from 3.09 to 3.92 (Shanghai Municipal Statistics Bureau, 2001, 2011; Beijing Municipal Statistics Bureau, 2001, 2011).

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