

*Of Irreverence and the Irrevocable – How Chinese Visual Artists Negotiate  
Contemporary Monumental Architecture in Beijing*

Angela Becher

School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), UK

0306

The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013

Abstract

This paper deals with two contemporary monumental buildings in Beijing, and how their meaning is visually negotiated by two Chinese photographers. Assuming that architecture, apart from its functional use, represents communication (Eco 1997), the aim is to inquire into how this communication is perceived and how meaning is attributed to architecture through artistic processes. A semiological perspective frames the analysis of the visual narratives and places the artworks within the wider discourse on architecture and societal developments in China. While it is assumed that there is no single explanation but rather a “horizon of meaning” in architecture (Lefebvre 2000, p.222), the paper attempts to single out some of the meanings ascribed to two iconic buildings in Beijing, namely the National Stadium (*Beijing Guojia tiyuchang* 北京国家体育场) and the National Centre for the Performing Arts (*Guojia dajuyuan* 国家大剧院) by looking at them through the idiosyncratic lenses of the Beijing-based photographers Liu Jiaxiang 刘家祥 (b. 1959) and Liu Jin 刘瑾 (b. 1971).

## Introduction

The economic reforms which started in the late 1970s in China were accompanied by a building boom which gradually turned the country into the biggest construction site the world has ever seen. In Beijing, this process gained momentum in the wake of the 2008 Olympics which triggered an unremitting construction phase in the capital with no less than 20,000 development projects prior to the event (Dubrau 2010, pp.11–12). While in the 1980s, Beijing still featured large spaces of small alleys (*Hutongs* 胡同) and low-storey (quadrangle) houses (*Siheyuan* 四合院 or often *Dazayuan* 大院子), today, the city has irretrievably lost much of its vernacular architecture. Moreover between 1996 and 2008 an estimated 1 million inner-city residents had to be displaced to the outskirts to pave the way for vast urban redevelopment projects (Hsing 2010, p.4). The building frenzy has led to a steadily growing number of rather eclectic and aesthetically uninspiring high-rises. However, it also engendered the emergence of a number of spectacular buildings of cutting edge design and monumental grandeur, two of which will be discussed in this paper. The term *monumentality* is thereby invoked to denote a giant, durable and solemn structure in a public place, that employs devices of rhetoric, grandeur and symbolism (Curtis 1984, p.65; Wu 1995, p.1). These admittedly rather ambiguous definitions summarise a wider discourse on monumentality in architectural theory of which some ideas will be further expounded in this paper (See for instance Wu 1995; Curtis 1984; Choay 1984; Riegl [1903] 2004; Lefebvre [1974] 2000; Giedion [1956] 1984; Kahn 1971; Mumford 1938; Barthes [1964] 1997).

There is arguably little doubt about the monumental notion of Beijing's iconic buildings, which include mundane sports stadiums in the Olympic Park (such as the National Stadium and the National Aquatics Centre), pompous office towers in the Central Business District (such as the new headquarters of state broadcaster CCTV) or the Grand National Theatre in the political heart of the city. Umberto Eco (b. 1932) asks in his semiological analysis why architecture is a challenge to semiotics, the "science of signs." His answer is that most architectural objects are not designed to *communicate*, but designed to *function* (Eco 1997, p.182). The scale, the expenses and the extraordinary design of Beijing's iconic structures however, bear clear signs that functional considerations can not have been the only motivation for their inception. In China, just like in any country of the world, there is always a subtext to the monumental expression. That's why the sensational changes in the aesthetics of Beijing inevitably prompt reflections on the impetus behind this development.

Architecture has ever since been an instance of the production of locality as well as a tool for the homage to power (Appadurai 1996; Sudjic [2005] 2011). In contemporary China, too, architecture is used to stage the power of political as well as economic forces. On one hand, it is the state, who uses architecture to underline its claims to hegemony by showing pervasive

presence in the landscape (Broudehoux 2010). On the other hand, monumental architecture is also the expression of a globalised economy that is increasingly transforming Chinese cities into transnational spaces. The tallest (western-style) high-rises and biggest shopping malls are the material catalysts of corporate power and celebrate the commodity culture of global capitalism. It has even become essential to the survival of the modern Chinese city to capitalise on monumentality, in order to attract attention and funds through global events, world exhibitions, conferences and the like (Broudehoux 2010). Moreover, an alluring urban iconography fuels an upward development of property prices and proves beneficial to the construction sector. While the above mentioned factors can be applied to all urban parts of China, they attain particular importance in Beijing as capital city, where public space, its nomenclature and architectural symbols seek to wield the citizenry together in a collective, national identity.

### **Architecture as Spectacle**

The Beijing National Stadium, popularly called the “Bird’s Nest” for its grid-like steel structure which resembles intertwined twigs, was inaugurated in 2008. Holding 80,000 permanent spectator seats and 11,000 temporary ones, the National Stadium was the most significant of the thirty-one venues arranged for the Olympic Summer Games that year. It is estimated that construction works had cost around 400 million US Dollar (Broudehoux 2007, p.385). The project was jointly designed between Swiss architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, both laureates of the prestigious Pritzker Prize in Architecture, who won the international bidding process launched by the national and city government (Ren 2011, p.140). Internationally popular Chinese artist Ai Weiwei 艾未未 (b. 1957) served as artistic consultant, yet later distanced himself from the project as he deemed the building to represent a “fake smile.” The stadium not only hosted the athletic and football competitions during the Olympic Summer Games in 2008 but also the remarkably spectacular opening and closing ceremonies. When the Games kicked off on August 8th, the Bird’s Nest was silhouetted by sumptuous fireworks, designed by one of China’s most prominent artists Cai Guoqiang 蔡国强 (b. 1957), acclaimed for his gunpowder paintings and pyrotechnical spectacles. The ensuing imposing show inside the stadium, orchestrated by film director Zhang Yimou 张艺谋 (b. 1951), then chronicled Chinese history and the country’s eminent inventions such as papermaking, the compass, gunpowder and printing celebrated China’s modernity (Leibold 2010, p.23). The awe-inspiring show underlined China’s re-emergence as an important power on the global stage, an orchestrated statement for which the Bird’s Nest was the setting and the epitome at the same time.

The representation of the Bird’s Nest in the photographic work of Liu Jiaxiang (Fig. 1) is a visual commentary on this architectural, Olympic mega-project. Liu (b. 1959) who lives and

works in Beijing, has been specialized in the field of advertisement photography where he was awarded a number of prizes. In 2008 his work took on more pronounced artistic traits and resulted in a series of digitally altered photographs which negotiate the meaning of some of the most iconic buildings and spaces in Beijing including the new headquarters of CCTV and Tiananmen Square.

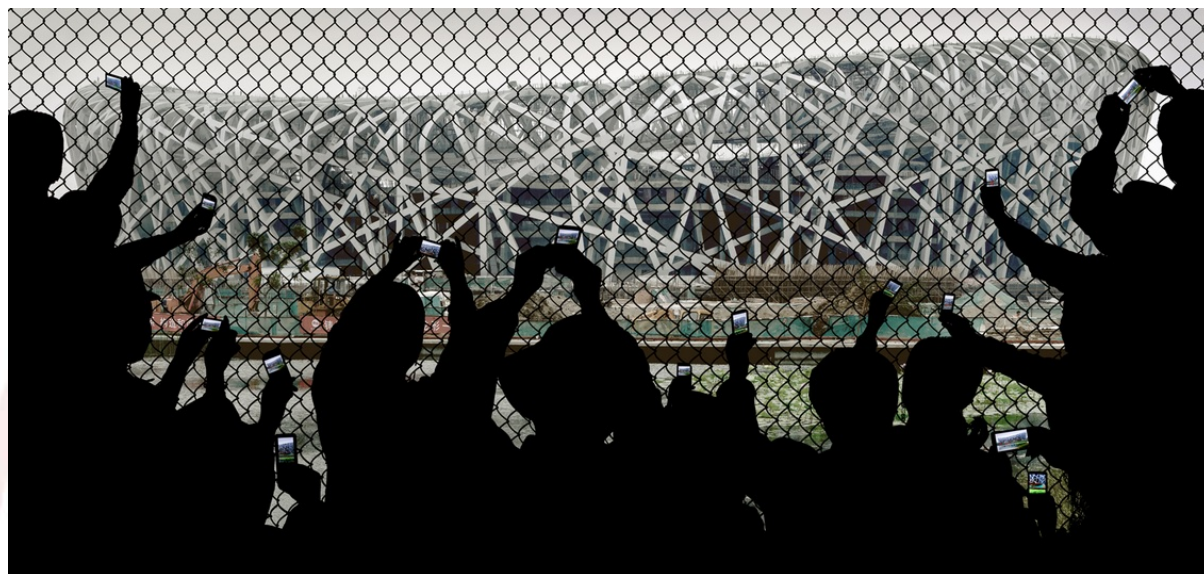


Fig. 1

Similarly to other works in that series, the image is composed of three layers. In the rear we see a photograph of a building, here the Bird's Nest, while it is yet unfinished and surrounded by cranes and building material. The foreground is dominated by the shadows of a number of spectators who are shown from behind while they eagerly raise their arms to take photographs of the building with their mobile phones. The image of the stadium is reiterated on the numerous phone screens and its brightness is the only source of light among the black throng of onlookers. The background and the foreground are separated from top to bottom by a wired fence of the kind that is commonly used to impede trespassing.

In this image the Bird's Nest, even prior to its function as a sports stadium, conspicuously takes on an additional, communicative function. Still under construction, the stadium has already turned into a site sought by tourists with a zeal and enthusiasm resembling a pilgrimage. The people in the image gather as a frenetic crowd in front of the building, and the stark contrast of their black shadows bestows the scene with a comic book aesthetic and a sense of farcicality. Roland Barthes (1915-1980) observes in his semiological analysis of the Eiffel Tower in Paris that the tower, despite featuring a "zero degree of the monument," received each year twice as many visitors as the Louvre. The reason he identifies is that the tower was the crystallizer (rather than the true object) of a dream of which one could become part by visiting it (Barthes [1979] 1997, p.7). As a matter of fact, in 2005 "One world, one

dream (*tong yige shijie, tong yige mengxiang* 同一个世界, 同一个梦想)” became the Olympic slogan that the Beijing Organizing Committee had reformulated for the Games. They decided to change the initial motto of “New Beijing, Great Olympics (*Xin Beijing, xin aoyun* 新北京新奥运”, literally “New Beijing, new Olympics”). Alluding to a reinvention of the Olympics by the Chinese, the slogan was thought to be too pretentious and sinocentric. The reference to the unifying potential of the Olympics was a much wiser decision with respect to a global and local audience. Within China, the Olympics were a fortunate occasion for the government to advertise national cohesion which was urgently needed among a population increasingly dissatisfied over land right disputes, growing social inequalities, and widespread corruption (Broudehoux 2007, p.391). And it did so with much success. As happens in all countries, the Olympic Games tend to incite patriotism, pride and a sense of belonging. In Liu Jiaxiang’s photograph, too, a strong unifying conviction seems to unite the people who gather around the Olympic stadium. Yet their agitation, in which everyone seeks to get ahead of the next with their mobile phones, suggests a somewhat excessive ardour. This might hint at the fact that the Olympic euphoria in China took on increasingly nationalistic traits during the course of the preparations for the Games. The state media contributed to a nationalist sentiment, which was then warmly welcomed by large parts of the population. Many Chinese eagerly participated in rallies of red flag waving and patriotic song chanting and decided to quickly denigrate critics of the Olympics as traitors of the nation (Nyíri et al. 2010; Leibold 2010). The National Stadium became the site and the embodiment of this movement. In Liu Jiaxiang’s photograph, however, the mass of people perceives the National Stadium only as a re-mediated experience through their mobile phones. Liu thereby blurs the boundaries between the fictional and the actual, between the reified grand narrative and its ostracised clientele. It is interesting, that the individuals partaking in Liu’s agitated audience are not only separated from the building, they are also undistinguished and unidentified. Common in all works of the series, at the bottom of the image they merge into a black mass of disembodied individuals, who, seemingly devoid of a sense of self, frantically seek external reaffirmation in the Bird’s Nest symbolism of collective identity.

What many considered a contradiction, however, was the fact that the design of the National Stadium (just like all of the other representational buildings of that period) were awarded to foreign and not Chinese architects. This quest for an international branding of national status symbols has to be understood as an architectural image campaign seeking to underline the country’s internationalization and the refashioning of its capital into a global metropolis on an equal level to London or New York. The former Olympic slogan “New Beijing, Great Olympics” testifies to this ideal of a radical urban image makeover. It also reflects the Chinese infatuation with foreign products. This finds its most interesting expression in the westernization of Chinese life, such as roman-letter product names for utterly Chinese goods

(consumed by utterly Chinese consumers) or the promotion of Chinese fashion through Western photo models. The assumed supremacy of foreign quality is usually added to by the hope for an aura of self-assertive cosmopolitanism and social status. By exaggerating the excitement of the group, Liu Jiaxiang might therefore as well scrutinise the fetishization of the foreign, the transnational, represented by the foreign-designed Bird's Nest.

By separating the audience from the building by a fence, Liu moreover hints at issues of social polarization and exclusion which can not be separated from China's grandiloquent architecture. The construction works for the Olympics not only entailed relocations as well as forced evictions (Campanella 2008, p.130), but were moreover made possible by particularly low construction costs thanks to the immense and particularly cheap workforce of rural migrants. In 2010 there were approximately 275 million rural migrants throughout China (OECD 2013, p.86), many of whom sought to find work on urban construction sites in order to support the family in the poor countryside. These migrant workers help build the sumptuous urban image, but they are widely excluded from the perks and benefits the city provides, as they are not entitled to the household registration of the city (*hukou* 户口), which is the essential requirement to claim social benefits in China. The fence in Liu Jiaxiang's image is hence a metaphor for the social inequalities that characterise the Chinese society. These derive from an urban-rural divide, from the irreconcilable differences between the super rich and the poor within the cities as well as from the income disparities between Chinese regions. In the light of this social divide, we might assume that Liu Jiaxiang seeks to challenge the unifying symbolism of Beijing's national icon.

## Appeasing Monumentality

The National Centre for the Performing Arts is a glass and titanium dome with three halls for opera, concerts and theatre performances and which has an overall number of 5,452 seats. Construction began in 1998 and was finished the year prior to the Olympic Games incurring estimated costs of almost 5 billion RMB [approx. 811 million US Dollar, 2013] (Yu 2013, p.233). The design competition for this project of national importance, moreover located in Beijing's centre of political power at the prestigious and historically important Chang'an Avenue, was won by a French architect, Paul Andreu who beat over sixty-eight other internationally well-known architects (Dawson 2005). Since its inception, the project was accompanied by a heated political and aesthetic controversy. This debate revolved around the implication of foreign architects in this representative national project and around the futuristic design which, according to its critics, stood in opposition to the traditional and socialist architectural styles of the neighbouring Forbidden City, Great Hall of the People and Tiananmen Square (Yu 2013, p.233). In his photography, entitled *National Theatre (Guojia dajuyuan 国家大剧院)*, 2008) (Fig. 2) Liu Jin delivers a visual commentary on the imposing monumentality of the building and its powerful, political narrative.

Liu Jin (b. 1971), originally from Jiangsu Province, moved to Beijing in 1996 after graduating from the Department of Arts and Crafts of Jiangsu Xuzhou Engineering Institute a year earlier. Apart from photography, he has worked in oil painting, sculpture and performance art and he has exhibited widely in China and abroad.



Fig. 2

The present image, a digitally altered photograph, is taken from the series *Injured Angel* (*Shoushang tianshi* 受□天使) which Liu Jin began working on in 2005. In that series, people wearing white and blood-stained angel wings are photographed amidst disconsolate Chinese cityscapes which range from scenes of urban destruction and rubble, processes of construction, to shiny, but soulless façades of the refashioned city. The angel thereby stands for the fragile individual and its basic human longing for happiness, freedom and justice (Liu 2013). In the photograph, the silver grey oval dome of the theatre takes centre stage and separates the light blue sky from the enormous grey concrete square in front of the theatre. Barely distinguishable, a miniaturised angel (the artist himself) is squatting on the square and contemplates the building amidst a dreary atmosphere of melancholy and solitude. The building's and the square's proportions appear falsely magnified as compared to their factual dimensions which, it seems, coerces the angel into the role of an impassive spectator. Liu Jin makes use of the antithetical spatial relationship of the miniaturized angel with the aggrandized building to reduce the human to insignificance and inferiority. For the artist, this visual disproportion stands metaphorically for the weakness and helplessness of the Chinese individual in the face of an overwhelmingly powerful state, a disequilibrium, he asserts, that had been topical throughout Chinese history (Liu, 2013). The absence of other people or life of any kind moreover bestows the scene with an uncanny tranquillity, only broken through by the turbulent movement of flying plastic bags and a broken Coca-Cola can. We are reminded of a moment prior to a thunderstorm when a strong wind announces the imminent change of a still deceptively blue sky. The strongest light emerges from the top of the building which endows the theatre with an unreal aura and which turns the scene into a poetic and dreamlike cityscape. Yet one feels deranged by the rubbish, and in particular by the Coca-Cola can which takes on a menacing character, as it could hit the unprotected, naked angel at any time. But despite the disturbance of the rubbish, the imposing grandeur and solidity of the building confers onto the image a sense of composure. Liu Jin's photograph almost seems to be a visualization of what Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) described with respect to the totalizing power of monumental space, who said that,

“[t]o the degree that there are traces of violence and death, negativity and aggressiveness in social practice, the monumental work erases them and replaces them with a tranquil power and certitude (...). Thus the mortal moment or component of the sign is temporarily abolished in monumental space.” (Lefebvre [1974] 2000, p.222)

In this assertion Lefebvre carves out the appeasing facet of monumentality, which the state uses to seduce its followers as well as to intimidate its opponents (Broudehoux 2010). Lefebvre's conceptualization of monumentality with respect to death also reflects the (often



conflated) notion of the monument, whose function it is to commemorate, to underline existing social hierarchies and to vests ruling elites with an aura of permanence (Curtis 1984; Safdie 1984). Interestingly, the artist identifies a resemblance of the Grand National Theatre with ancient imperial tombs (Liu 2013). In the Western Han 西漢 (206 B.C.- 8 A.D.) for instance, small mountains were turned into necropolis and filled with lavish treasures for the afterlife of the deceased. While there are variations in the types of tombs built, some of them erected in the landscape in the form of oval hills, monumental mortuaries in the quest for immortality. The exorbitant expenses to endow and guard some of these tombs, however, were already in ancient times cause for controversy and dissent (Rawson 1999; Loewe 1992). Just like in contemporary China, in ancient times rulers chose for their monumental signifiers the most perceptible places. That's why as early as in the Qin 秦 (221-207 B.C.) and Western Han dynasties, ritual art which to date was stored in temples and tombs outside the urban cores, was then transferred to monumental palaces in the capital, in an attempt to exteriorise and visualise state power. (Wu 1995, p.78).

Liu Jin argues that many politicians in contemporary China still retained a sense of feudal reign, which showed that Chinese political culture was still substantially different from that of truly modern societies. For Liu, the Grand National Theatre is yet another symbol of an oppressive political power, which appears in the delusory guise of a theatre (Liu 2013). What might to some appear as an over-politicization of the built environment, gains immediate vindication when considering the history of the building. It was conceived at the outset of the Great Leap Forward in 1958 as the "National Theatre" and as such was part of the plan for the "Ten Great Buildings" (*Shi da jianzhu* 十大建筑) (Yu 2013, p.202). This public campaign was launched to prepare for the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1959. It implied the construction of ten representational buildings of monumental grandeur in Beijing (including the Great Hall of the People and Beijing Railway Station), intended to communicate to the world socialist China's modern achievements through revolutionary architecture (Rowe & Kuan 2004, p.114). The idea to build the "National Theatre" was abandoned in 1959, seemingly due to the lack of funds and time. However planning continued over the years, until the theatre was eventually realised in 2007 (Yu 2013, p.204), still under the aegis of the same one-party state.

William Curtis, when he discusses the predicaments of 20<sup>th</sup> century monument creation in industrialised societies, argues that it was the common lack of a leading group that could claim a "divine sanction" which complicated the creation of monumental architecture. He also assumed that the difficulty to reach a consensus over common values further impeded monumental material signifiers (As discussed in Safdie 1984, 65). In contemporary China, former ideological values, which in the 1950s could still be epitomised by "Ten Great

Buildings,” have become void and are only feebly substituted by an erratic credo of economic development (Dirlik & Zhang 1997). However, the continuity of authoritarian politics enables the imposition of values and hence the creation of irrevocable monumental symbols. Liu’s inclusion of flying rubbish in the image is also a commentary on the economic development and the concomitant consumer culture in China, represented in particular by the symbolic Coca-Cola can. A rather unambiguous metaphor, in contemporary Chinese art it has been used in many different ways to criticise the growing influence of Western capitalism. In the 1990s for instance, Wang Guangyi 王广力 (b. 1957) juxtaposed the Coca-Cola logo with socialist realist images of the revolutionary past, whereas Ai Weiwei caused a scandal by painting the logo onto a Han dynasty urn. For Liu Jin, the remnants of this consumer culture contribute to a dramatic environmental degradation, a serious problem which has long been overlooked or only cursorily dealt with by politicians. The trope of the plastic bags derives from Liu’s reminiscences of the winter wind in Beijing which, as he remembers, used to carry all sorts of rubbish with it. The tremendous efforts undertaken to create an impeccable Beijing, ready for the Olympic Games, have considerably reduced the amount of litter in the inner city. But according to Liu, the problem has shifted to the outskirts which now feature horrifying spaces of growing waste dumps (Liu 2013). In his photographic imaginary, Liu Jin transports Beijing’s hidden waste back into the city centre, in an irreverent attempt to defy the irrevocable.

### **Concluding remarks**

The review of the visual negotiations of monumental buildings and space in the works of Liu Jiaxiang and Liu Jin represent a little foray into the infinite “horizon” of architectural meaning. Despite the shared medium of digitally altered photography, both artists use different aesthetic devices to present their disentanglement of the buildings’ signification. Liu Jiaxiang’s iconoclastic approach uses stark visual contrasts and a cynical undertone to mock the idolatry of an unreflective citizenry. Attracted by the alluring iconography of the National Stadium, they opt to submerge amidst a mass of streamlined individuals. Unaware of the manipulation at stake and despite their factual exclusion from the sumptuousness of the building, the crowd in Liu Jiaxiang’s photograph still derives a sense of contentment in the form of a reassuring collective identity. Liu Jin, on the other hand, expresses his understanding of the monumental narrative with poetic subtlety and lyricism. Through the trope of the vulnerable body he creates an elegiac image of the Grand National Theatre hinting at issues of death, history and environmental degradation. By artificially distorting spatial relationships, he carves out the precariousness of the human condition in times of globalised markets and Chinese *realpolitik*. Both imagistic discourses revolve around the antagonistic relationship of the human and the architectural signifiers and carve out how, in

the light of an imposing monumentality, the individual is reduced to insignificance and urged to conformism.



## Appendices

### Figures

Fig. 1 Liu Jiexiang 刘家祥, *Bird's Nest* (Niaochao 鸟巢), 2007, 80cmx169cm and 50cmx106cm, C-print.

Fig. 2 Liu Jin 刘瑾, *National Theater* (Guojia da juyuan 国家大剧院), 2008, 160x306cm, C-print.

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