

Cultural text, artistic narrative, and visual feast: Interpreting the spectacular in the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympics

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Abstract: The presentations with distinctive national features in the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics have worked together to render to the world a unique and splendid visual show. Notably, every part of the performance involved in this discussion is characterized by the extensive employment of traditional Chinese cultural elements. To be specific, the performance of the body art is connected to the making of a Chinese landscape painting, which overtly gives prominence to the mediality of the human body in the creation of the traditional national cultural images such as sun, mountain, river, cloud and the like – the very representative cultural symbols of Chinese nation. The famous Dunhuang dance in the section of the Silk Road is presented with a long green satin which is heavily vested with national cultural connotations. The pillars used as stage props are engraved with the images of *loong* – a symbol of auspiciousness in Chinese culture, for the *loong* embodies courage. The invention of the movable-type printing significantly involves the wisdom of the Chinese people, and Tai Chi performance evokes the harmonious spirit that the Chinese nation and people greatly value. The rendering of these images through creative ways has casted the opening ceremony into a unique cultural text – as narrated in well-designed artistic forms, it has presented the world with an extraordinary visual feast.

Keywords: cultural input, artistic arrangement, creative rendering, splendid scene, visual impact

Introduction

The artistic performances in the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics involve copious national images and symbols, providing the audience with extremely striking visual perceptions. This reflects peculiar thinking modes and distinctive cultural deposits of the nation.

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In view of this, a constellation of feature images such as the emblem of the Beijing Olympics “Chinese Seal, Dancing Beijing”, Gold-inlaid-with-Jade medal or Medal of a Heavenly Match of Gold and Jade, the mascot “Fuwa”, the torch “Lucky Clouds” etc., all clearly flesh out the traditional Chinese cultures. The performances like the painting scroll, the Chinese *kanji*, Peking opera, the Silk Road, the Rites and Music, the lofty *loong* pillars, etc., demonstrate the grandeur of China’s long-standing and flourishing civilization. In particular, the presentation of the Chinese character “和” (The Chinese pronunciation “he” in second tone meaning harmony) reflects the essence of Chinese traditional culture and reveals China’s perseverance in pursuing a harmonious and unified society. Just as a saying goes “The national one is the international one” or “What ethnic is what worldwide”, these cultural elements have become bright flowers in the treasure-house of human civilization.

Human Body as Medium

Using the human body to draw a painting impresses people with a profound sense of beauty. This artistic effect can only be achieved by the creative application of various art media. Medium here refers to the two sides of people or things that are connected to each other. In the west, the initial meaning of the word is similar to that in Chinese. In a broader sense, Marshall McLuhan, when looking into the biological nature of human body, argues that the medium is the message. This idea tends to highlight that every kind of medium has some connection with the human body. To be specific, the stone axes can be seen as the extension of hands, the wheels the feet, the books the eyes, the broadcasting the ears, the clothes the skins, etc. Every substance that can establish connection between people and things is called medium. In the field of art, medium refers to the physical means that the artists apply for artistic expression in the process of artistic creation, and a kind of material carrier used to convey information associated with aesthetic, and thus aiming to arouse aesthetic sense. Medium plays an important intermediary role in the whole system of the art practice. The body can also become a medium for the artistic creation. The body of an artist is the most basic physical basis to carry out the artistic production. A painter uses his eyes to observe, his brain to think, and his hands to draw. In the process of his artistic creation, his body is an indispensable existence to assist the artistic practice. The body, apart from marking the existence of the subject, can also be taken as the

object of artistic creation. The bodies of the models are treated as the objects of copying when the sculptors create sculptures and the painters paint paintings. Moreover, the dramatic art uses languages and outer body movements to express itself, while the dancing art uses only the outer body movements.



Fig. 1 The beauty of the body art created in dancing out a Chinese landscape painting
(Source: Google)

In principle, painting takes canvas and pigments or paper, ink and charcoal as mediums to draw, while dancing uses human body to act out movements. However, the body performance in the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics uses the human body as the medium to create a piece of painting. Here, the conventional drawing tools are supplanted by the human body. Being used as a medium to draw, it means that the body is no longer a common subject confined by the tools, and also not the object of creation or a simple carrier, but already becomes a subject, which has been fully liberated from any restrictions and thus can sway freely over the paper. Zhang Yimou, the general director of the opening ceremony, says that “Putting on performances on a piece of paper is the simplest, the most direct and open art of performance. This is what I am always pursuing. I always believe that this is the biggest highlight” (“Exclusive Interview with Zhang” 2010). Dancing freely on a piece of paper does not mean drawing a picture mechanically, but it intends to draw some symbolic

images such as mountains, earth, rivers, sun, etc., on the paper, which entails unique symbolic meanings of Chinese culture.

It is known to all that Chinese ink painting values aura more than form. Moreover, in the performance of Tai Chi (Tai Chi is a Chinese cosmological term for the “Supreme Ultimate” of undifferentiated absolute and infinite potential, the oneness before duality), the performers form a huge circle in the centre of stage. Their performance interprets a very essential aspect of the Chinese traditional culture, that is, the harmony between man and nature. This is to use the human body to vividly illustrate the view of the universe and lifestyle that have been advocated by the Chinese people. That the body as medium participates in artistic performances of the opening ceremony confirms Turner’s remark as “Because the body in modern society has an uncertain ontological status (as a living organism, as a part of nature, or as a system of biological information), we can think of the modern world as a somatic society that is a social system in which political and social problems are often expressed through or manifest in the body” (Turner 2009, 514). What’s more, “The body as representation and embodiment as practice and experience ...These theoretical conflicts between representation and practice can be resolved by sharply distinguishing between the body as a cultural system in which bodies are produced as carriers of powerful symbolic realities and embodiment as the practice that is necessary to function in the everyday life” (Ibid., 522). The participation of the body as medium in the artistic creation does not only reflect the innovation in terms of art form, but at the same time effectively demonstrates the Chinese culture.

Silk Road: New Meanings and Connotations

The performance “The Silk Road” entails two forms of realistic operations in ancient China: The Overland Silk Road and the Maritime Silk Road. The Silk Road was an ancient network of trade routes that were for centuries central to all kinds of interactions throughout the regions of the Asian continent connecting the East and West, and stretching from the Korean peninsula and Japan to the Mediterranean Sea. The German geologist Richthofen (2017) in his book *China: The Results of My Travels and the Studies Based Thereon* uses for the first time this expression “The Silk Road” to describe the trade route from western China to Europe. According to Richthofen, the Silk Road refers to a route for silk trade linking China and Central Asia, China and India from 114 B.C. to 127 A.C. This expression was accepted by

the general public and officially applied in the academic circle. It started as an economic corridor to transport silk produced in ancient China. The Silk Road has become a very important channel to facilitate the economic and cultural exchanges between China and the West. The “the Overland Silk Road” is presented as a Dunhuang dancer dancing out a beautiful and highly distinctive Dunhuang flying dance projecting the desert as the setting of the stage.

Dunhuang flying dance recreates its own unique style by multi-ethnic cultural blend. In the dance performance, the audience can enjoy the Greek goddesses, the variable stances of the Hindu deities and the mysterious veils of the Persian nation. More importantly, all of these are combined with the beautiful form of Chinese classical dance. Dunhuang flying dance blends the essences of various dance techniques.

The most difficult part in performing the flying dance is the presentation of the long silk satin; what is most impressive to the audience in the performance of the Silk Road Dance in the opening ceremony is the flowing of the green long silk. As the twirling of the dancer on the high-lifted scroll, the long satin in lengths of more than twenty meters is beautifully danced, it is just like the reappearance of the flying apsaras. Meanwhile, the graceful movements and postures of the dancer manifest the romantic charm of the oriental goddesses. The high-lifted scroll is changed into a picture of a vast desert. Setting the desert as the background of the stage, along with the graceful dancing of the dancer, takes the audience into an extraordinary journey of friendship by the way of the overland silk road.

The reminiscence of the Silk Road in history responds to the solidarity of every nation in the world which has become a major theme in the age of globalization and the common aspiration of the people around the world. The Silk Road dance performance takes the audience back to the ancient time. Indeed, the Overland Silk Road is like a long silk panel, serving to connect the cultures of ancient Asia, Europe and Even Africa by means of trade.



Fig. 2 The famous Dunhuang dance performed with a long green silk satin
(Source: XinhuaNet)

With the progression of the ceremony, the scene moves from the reminiscence of the Overland Silk Road to the glorious history of the Maritime Silk Road. Today, people live in a global village, and communication is very convenient and fast. It is noteworthy that in today's open ocean routes, the longest and most ancient route was opened up in China, which is known as the Maritime Silk Road. A great number of literary texts have detailed records about the route of ancient Maritime Silk Road. The ancient Maritime Silk Road was a maritime trade route which started with the southeast coastal port in China, which traveled across the South China Sea and entered the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, via the Strait of Malacca and across the Indian Ocean and reached as far as West Asia and the east coast of Africa. It came into being in the Qin and Han dynasties, came into flourish in the Tang and Song dynasties and reached its peak in the early Ming Dynasty. The Maritime Silk Road was opened up through numerous difficulties and dangers, flourished for a millennium and never declined, and its brilliance lasted for generations and did not go out.

The performance of the Maritime Silk Road is based on a historical scenario in China's Ming Dynasty, namely the Voyage of Zheng He. Zheng He was a court eunuch in the Ming Dynasty. Under the order of the emperor, Zheng He led a massive fleet to launch sea voyages in the early years of Ming Dynasty. The performance scene of the Voyage of Zheng He is magnificent. About 1000 actors file into two lines and hold up huge paddles and walk into the performance venue with very neat steps. Along with the majestic music, the actors strive to swing the paddles to act out a scene of fighting against the torrents and heavy waves. This shows the wisdom and courage of the Chinese people in face of challenges in natural world. The performance of the actors vividly demonstrates the circumstances of the rough sea with dreadful foaming billows. Under the atmosphere, the audience is brought into a sea voyage that is full of adventure and surprises. What is worth noticing in the televised video recording of the same is that the lens of the camera constantly changes its focal length. Sometimes it takes a panoramic view from a great distance so as to present magnificent scene. Sometimes it gives the hard-fought paddlers a close-up shot. Time is frozen in these glamour shots and the audience is thereby intoxicated with these great moments in the Chinese history. The ancient Maritime Silk Road is not only the channel for communication and personal exchanges between the East and the West, but also the channel for cultural communication and cultural appreciation.



Fig. 3 The glory of the Maritime Silk Road in history found echoes in the dancing oars (Source: Google)

Some scholars point out that both the Overland Silk Road and the Maritime Silk Road is the reflection of the Chinese culture as a culture of openness. Openness, communication and harmony were the prominent characteristics involved in trade in ancient China from the time of Han dynasty, and these are precisely the qualities of the modern Olympic Games, as the 2008 Beijing Olympics shows.

***Loong*¹ Pillars**

The performance of the five flourishing dynasties intends to represent the story of five dynasties in Chinese history, the Tang and Song Dynasties, the Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties. While the impassioned music is played out, in the brightly-lit stadium, thousands of female dancers dressed in ancient costumes dance elegantly toward the centre of the stage. There are 32 bandstands that are placed on both sides of the stage and on each bandstand there is a male musician. While the musicians play music with graceful movements, the dancers dance beautifully with the sound of the music. It is in the stadium where music and dancing are in full swing. During this merry scene, on the edge of the Bird's Nest, there appears slowly in turn the famous style scroll of the five dynasties. And then the style scroll spins along the edge of the Bird's Nest, and at the same time the 32 bandstands rise up slowly and simultaneously and finally emerge as lofty loong pillars. The loong pillars stand tall and upright, exhibiting the majestic and magnificent Chinese ancient civilization. At this moment, the pictures of majestic palace complex appear on the edge of the Bird's Nest and echo with the loong pillars. With this setting, the audience, in their open imagination, can imagine the Bird's Nest as a palace.

¹ Dragon in the Chinese culture and in the Western culture refers to two different images. Dragon in the Chinese culture enjoys high and sacred status, and it is connected with the root of Chinese civilization, synonymous with the fetish that can swim in the water and fly in the sky, the symbol of good luck, the auspicious things, the metaphor of outstanding talents, the embodiment of authority, the crystallization of the wisdom and knowledge, the messenger of peace, etc. bestowing the blessing and the positive energy upon the society. On the contrary, dragon in the western culture is equated with the fire monster, harmful, evil, anti-hero, sign of war, symbol of terror, carrier of sin, etc., a symbol of the bad and ugly, bringing disaster and negative energy. Based on this argument, some scholars in China suggest that dragon in the Chinese culture be termed as the Chinese *loong*, or only the loong in oriental world, and thus distinguishing it from the negative image of dragon in the western culture.



Fig. 4 The times of prosperity in history resonated with the pageantry of the lofty loong pillars (Source: XinhuaNet)

Pillars used in the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics are called the Chinese *loong* pillars. It is because the patterns of the flying *loongs* are engraved on the pillars. People do not feel shocked seeing the patterns of the Chinese *loongs* in the opening ceremony.

The Chinese *loong* has already become the spiritual symbol, cultural emblem and emotional tie of the Chinese nation. The Chinese regard themselves as the descendants of the *loong*. The tolerant, blessed, harmonious and progressive spirits that the *loong* contains and displays are exactly the Chinese national spirits which have run throughout ancient and modern and last forever. By hosting the Olympic Games in Beijing, the Chinese people certainly hope that the spirits of the Chinese nation can be promoted and the Chinese elements can be exhibited to the world. The general director of the opening ceremony Zhang Yimou and his directing team of course take into account first the Chinese *loong* which takes the first place in the symbols of the Chinese culture.

Moreover, the modeling of the *loong* pillars takes as its reference the ornamental pillars erected in front of palaces, tombs, etc. The patterns of the flying *loong* are engraved on the pillars and the patterns are usually designed as the *loongs* hover up in the vast sea of the clouds, expressing the vision of the Chinese people – soaring freely in the sky and floating effortlessly in the universe as the *loongs* do. Some critics have commented that the appearance of the *loong* pillars

annotates perfectly the aesthetics of architecture in China. With this presentation, the Bird's Nest is taken as a palace. Or it is only a slight exaggeration to say that a palace is condensed into 32 *loong* pillars and the audience seems to be back to the prosperous times of those glorious dynasties in Ancient China. By making a comprehensive survey, it might be argued that the Chinese *loong* has experienced three stages of development. In the first stage, natural objects such as number of animals and celestial phenomena that are taken as the objects of worship by humans are sublimated into fetish that can swim in the water and fly in the sky. In the second stage, the fetish is developed into the vehicle of outstanding figures like king, the symbol of imperial power, the embodiment of good luck, etc. These implications continue to develop and finally stand for the symbol of the Chinese nation.

After three stages of development, the Chinese *loong* has absorbed, gathered, manifested and expressed something in the Chinese culture which is important, brilliant, of contemporary value and far-reaching realistic significance, for example, compatibility, harmony, blessing, people-oriented, sustainable development, peaceful rising, etc. Obviously, the culture of Chinese *loong* not only has a long-standing history, but reflects social progress and development, showing a posture of inheriting the history and creating the future. It provides a continuously progressive Chinese nation with reference to wisdom and spiritual motivation. In the meanwhile, the advancing Chinese nation ceaselessly adds new elements which coincide with the development of times to the Chinese *loong* culture. The lofty pillars engraved with the flying Chinese *loong* shows the Chinese people as well as the whole world that the descendants of the *loong* (metaphor for the Chinese nation), who evolved from the remote antiquity, have been struggling to rise and now stand superbly and magnificently in the east of the world.

Spirit of Harmony: Chinese Characters and Tai Chi

One striking feature revolving around the opening ceremony is about the harmonious spirit embedded deeply in the Chinese age-old culture. The presentation of the Chinese character “和” (the Chinese pronunciation: he, the second tone, meaning “harmony”) is a case in point. Out of the four earliest written languages in the world – ancient Egyptian, ancient Sumerian, ancient Babylonian and ancient Chinese, only the Chinese writing system was preserved and continues

to exert the influence on the world. The ancient Chinese characters are loaded with long and profound cultural history of the Chinese nation. They are the carriers of the spiritual culture and mainstream culture in China. In the opening ceremony, the character “和” is presented in the way of movable-type printing. The movable-type printing was invented during the Northern Song Dynasty. It is considered as a great contribution to the world by the Chinese people. It pushes forwards the history of world civilization.

At the beginning of the performance, 3000 performers acting as the disciples of Confucius move gracefully into the centre of the performance venue with bamboo slips on their hands. As the procession marches forward, they also chant words of wisdom quoted from *The Analects of Confucius*, such as “Within the four seas all men are brothers” (Confucius 2006, 173), which emphasizes the theme of world-as-family. Accompanied by the loud and harmonious chanting of Confucius’s disciples, the three-dimensional printing in movable type appears magically in the middle of the huge painting scroll. The square-shaped characters bump up and down, and are constantly changing. Like a breeze blowing over, the whole movable printing board is presented as layer upon layer of peaks and knolls, looking like surging waves. The dynamic performance shows the world the evolution process of the Chinese characters. The performance of movable-type printing not only looks like the ancient cases of movable-type printing, but the modern computer keyboard.

When the performance comes to this point, suddenly the character “鈺” in its ancient font is vividly presented in the middle of the movable-type printing plate and it is gradually replaced by the old style of character “龠”. Finally, the character “和” in its modern font is presented. The successive display of the three versions of the character “和” illustrate the evolution process of the Chinese characters, and gives voice to the humanistic philosophy of Confucius, namely “Harmony is the most precious, and peace is to be cherished”. This highlights the spirit of harmony of the Chinese people, and reflects value orientation in Chinese traditional culture which is “the harmonious relationship between people and between man and nature” as well. This helps project the theme of the Beijing Olympics, namely “One World, One Dream”. This is the essence and universal value of the Olympic spirit, reflecting the common wishes of the world that is in pursuit of a bright future under the inspiration of the Olympic

spirit. More importantly, the display of the character “和” delivers the supreme state of the culture of harmony in China – the harmony between man and nature. From the perspective of epistemology, the category of the “和” in Chinese philosophy emphasizes the harmony between man and nature. “Man” and “Nature” are the eternal propositions in the Chinese traditional culture, and the relationship between these two constitutes distinctive characteristics of the Chinese traditional culture.

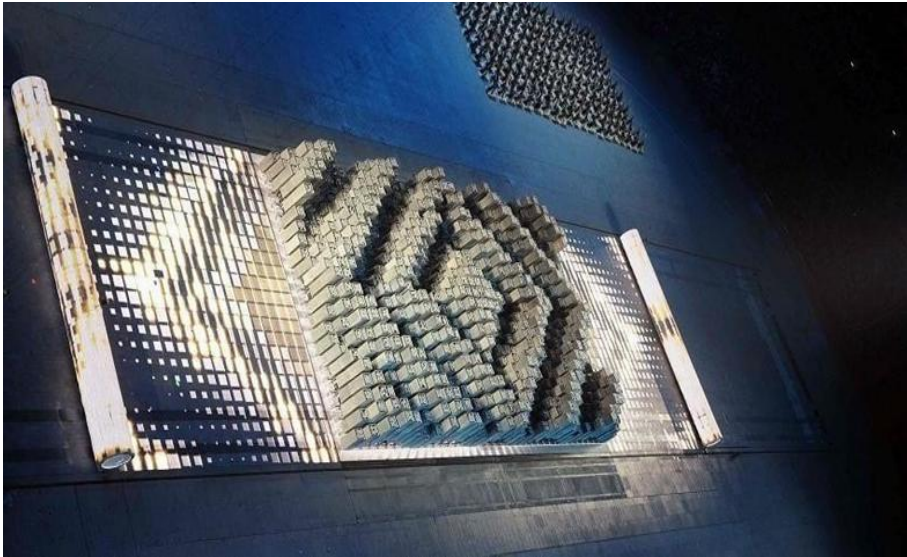


Fig.5 The magic of the movable-type printing displayed in the opening ceremony
(Source: XinhuaNet)

The cultural origins of ancient China adhere to the harmony between man and nature and fight against separating man from nature. It is this distinctive characteristic that distinguishes Chinese philosophy from the western philosophy. The theory of man and nature based on the spirit of harmony is taken as the theoretical basis on which the value orientation of Chinese traditional culture has been constructed. As it is stated:

The Unity of Man and Nature’ is not only the highest state of Chinese culture, but also the highest ideal of life of the Chinese people. Therefore, it is taken as the most representative outlook of universe, view of life and nature, and also the best embodiment of the Chinese culture essence. It is a concept that is widely recognized by different schools of thought. When

compared with schools of philosophical thought in the ancient West and the Middle Ages, it is considered as a very unique concept. (Pan and Qiu 2000, 12)

In the Chinese traditional culture, the idea of harmony between man and nature has a long-standing and well-established history. The ancestors of the Chinese people at the very beginning were filled with reverence for nature, and slowly they develop an intimate relationship with nature. The intimate relationship between man and nature in the Chinese tradition is considered to be a very unique phenomenon in the history of world civilization. It has a lot to do with the traditional Chinese agricultural civilization and subsistence farming. Under the background of this farming-oriented agricultural production, the Chinese people develop an intense dependence upon the natural environment and always look forward to favorable weather. The ancestors of the Chinese people are particularly sensitive to the season changing and the climate variation. This gradually makes into being a kind of cultural mentality, namely the mentality of “the harmony between man and nature”, which emphasizes the mutual interdependence of the environment and the natural life in the universe. The emphasis on the coordinated relationship of the humans and the whole creation of the universe reflects humans’ pursuit of a harmonious relationship with nature.

The ancient Chinese people see man and nature as a big unity of life, within which all things on earth can be interrelated, interpenetrated, interplayed and interchanged. Just as the ancients said, “The nature of humans has something in common with that in nature”. Subsequently, a kind of cultural philosophy has come into being based on these ideas, which believes that man and nature are in integration and they keep a relationship of infinity. As a mode of thinking, the concept of “harmony between man and nature” embodies the distinctive properties of China’s traditional aesthetics. Qian Mu used to consider that the idea of “harmony between man and nature” is “the biggest contribution of the Chinese culture makes to the world. It is the destination of China’s traditional cultural thought” (Chen 2005, 20). The view of “harmony between man and nature” is a fundamental proposition of the Chinese traditional philosophy as well as the essential spirit of the Chinese traditional culture. Ji Xianlin, a world-renowned cultural scholar, also points out that “This idea that represents the main keynote of Chinese ancient philosophy is exceptionally great and of profound significance” (Ji 2011, 58). The

idea of “the harmony between man and nature” not only affects the politics and ethics of ancient China, but influences the development of aesthetics and arts in the course of history. It is extended and infiltrated through aesthetic and artistic fields, and hence has facilitated the formation of Chinese aesthetic spirit in direct and indirect ways.

The harmonious theme in the performance of the rich ancient Chinese culture is extended into the display of modern brilliant one. The performance of Tai Chi (a kind of traditional Chinese shadowboxing) by 2008 masters shows the blending of tradition and modern. As the name “nature” implies, the Tai Chi performance reveals the harmonious co-existence of man and nature – the integration of man and nature. The fluid movements achieved by 2008 performers when in harmony with nature are strong enough to move the entire world. Tai Chi is one of the most representative Chinese martial arts, and is characterized by “the combination of motion and quietness, and the integration of solidness and softness”. Under the atmosphere of ancient and mysterious oriental culture, the performance of Tai Chi is like rolling thunder when there are movements and like still water while in stillness. Sounds and scenes of nature, such as the ups-and-downs of nature and the bloom of flowers, are used to combine with the performance. In so doing, it vividly shows the relationship between “man and nature” as the status of “you have me, and I in you”. According to the Chinese people, all natural lives in the universe can be integrated into the Tai Chi. Fundamentally, Tai Chi is moved into the level of philosophizing to reflect an important philosophy of life and a great wisdom of the Chinese nation and people.

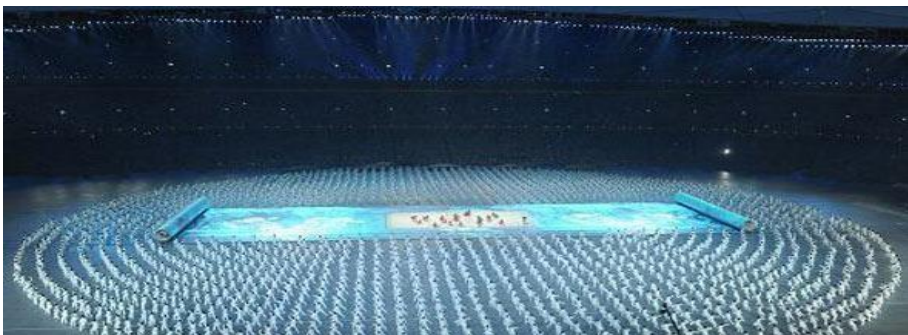


Fig. 6 The extraordinary visual aesthetics conveyed through the Tai Chi performance
(Source: Google)

There are four world-famous great inventions in ancient China – gunpowder, the compass, printing, and papermaking. Paper plays a very important role in the spiritual activities of mankind such as dissemination of information, written recording, the creation of calligraphy and painting, etc. Paper, to some extent, affects the progress of human civilization. The two extremely magnificent treasures in Chinese art- calligraphy and traditional Chinese painting- basically take paper as the major medium. Thus, the screening of a short film at the beginning depicting the making of paper and ending with a rolled-up scroll painting creatively sets the stage for the next segment.

Conclusion

Based on the above analysis, it can be concluded that the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics is a culturally-oriented activity which, to a great extent, highlights the projection of the traditional Chinese cultural essence to the world through the form of artistic presentation. Based on creative formulation and feasible strategy, the artistic performances in this historic event have successfully become a unique cultural card of the Chinese nation. Admittedly, selecting featured parts from the whole performance as the objects of analysis and interpreting them using the theories applicable in the field of visual cultural studies, it has been observed that China has spared no efforts to promote this cultural event in the hope of projecting its national image to the world. In addition, through this platform, it wishes to take a significant step towards the trend of globalization and attempts to move to the centre of the modern world structure on the one hand, and on the other, on this platform China demonstrates the trajectories of the cultural reflection and construction that it itself has experienced in the course of its modernization drive. On the basis this analysis, it is clear that the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics serves as a significant plane through which various Chinese national cultural elements have been conveyed to and transmitted across the world. And more importantly, with the help of various modern techniques and other relevant favorable conditions, China strives to take this opportunity to express and carry forward its dream of pursuing cultural modernity, and desires to showcase to the world its cultural awareness, cultural strategy and cultural consultation in a period of social transformation.

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