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Technologies of National Narration, Erasure, and Invisibility in the Chinese Science-Fiction Short Story, “The Olympic Dream”

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Abstract

Set within a historically realistic context of food rationing, withheld medical services, and socioeconomic segregation experienced by Beijing citizens in the lead-up to the 2008 Olympic Games, the digitally published science-fiction story “The Olympic Dream” (奥运梦) explores how a normativizing national dream is only possible through the erasure of its individual citizens. While the central conceit of the text is fictional, it allows for the making-visible of the process of invisibility that is its realistic theoretical underpinning. Drawing on theories of boundary collapse and asynchronous temporal rupture, this paper will examine how participation within a shared structural system necessitates and invites complicit participation on the part of those individuals being erased from the national narrative, and how China's historical interest in their own Olympic dream is predicated on this very self-selected invisibility of its citizens.

[1] The 2008 Beijing Olympics began with an actual act of erasure: Yang Peiyi, the voice of the ceremony's opening “Ode to the Motherland,” was replaced with a more photogenic double. While her voice was still used, her actual presence was erased in order to showcase a more conventionally attractive face to the viewers and spectators—a contribution that was foundational insofar as it was made invisible. In this same way, the narratives of Chinese national identity on display in the digitally published science fiction short story “The Olympic Dream” are deeply rooted in public insecurity about the ability of the country as a whole to perform and succeed on the global stage. While the text is predicated on a fictional biomedical conceit, the real 2008 Beijing Olympics serve as the backdrop against which these historical anxieties are expressed. By incorporating the very real food rationing, withheld medical services, and socioeconomic segregation experienced by Beijing citizens in the lead-up to the 2008 Olympic Games into the narrative, “The Olympic Dream” critiques and analyzes the sacrifices made by common Beijing citizens in order to promote national greatness.

[2] The site and setting of the Olympics are particularly relevant to the question of national identity in China, which—science fiction elements aside—has a long history of equating Olympic success with national power. Hosting the Olympic Games indicates that the nation is able to succeed at and thrive in a Western hegemonic tradition, and by retaining its own cultural values, symbolically come out on top—a

tantalizing goal for China, long loaded down with historical anxieties of shame, cultural and bodily weakness, and imperialism. Portrayed internally as the affirmation of a single nationalist dream, the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games were posited as a normative political and socializing force that definitively dispelled the shackles of the “sick man of Asia”^[1] label and carved out a space for China on the global scene as an equal player.^[2] Yet, in doing so, the Chinese Olympic narrative suppressed the individual experience in favor of a homogenous national success predicated on the absence of potentially problematic individual agency.

[3] Enmeshed firmly in this historical reality, the digitally-published short science fiction story “The Olympic Dream” (奥运梦; alternately translated in English as “Hibernation Pill”) imagines an Olympics in which the government distributes a hibernation pill to all of its Beijing residents so that they will sleep during the lead-up to the Olympic games and throughout the actual event itself, leaving the streets clear, the air clean, and allowing the best food to go to those foreign visitors who, by their presence, participation, and affirmation, are validating the Chinese national dream and the Chinese government. Originally posted in 2008 by a Mister Wang You (忘忧先生) and later translated by the *China Digital Times*’ Linjun Fan, the story follows Old Zhao, who becomes increasingly frustrated as the Olympics draw nearer and nearer and his father’s critical operation is put off. After being given a pill by a representative of the neighborhood committee that will make him sleep for a month, he administers the pill to his wife and ailing father, then takes it himself. When he awakens, a month has passed, and China has, according to all the residents in his neighborhood, become great. While Old Zhao is proud to have done his part to promote the national dream, his contribution is only possible by his complete erasure and removal from the situation.

[4] In fact, the world system presented in “The Olympic Dream” is one apprehensive of everyday coordination within a totalizing system that represses all individual agency and representation. The central structure of Old Zhao’s experience is its direction toward repression; he finds his place within a master narrative by recusing himself and his awareness from it, both quite literally—his one month of slumber—and more broadly within a structure that requires his absence in order to be able to function and thrive. The political vision expressed here is one of a normalizing political force that is dependent on a spatio-temporal narrative of absence to function. Old Zhao cannot exist at this point and time if the nationalist dream of greatness is to be achieved; his own narrative must be erased to make room for a broader grand master narrative of nationalist success.

[5] It is not just Old Zhao, his wife, and his ailing father who are given the hibernation pill, but all Beijing citizens who can’t afford—or are unable—to leave the city before the Olympics commence. The common people in “The Olympic Dream” are asked to remove themselves from society in favor of superhuman individuals that the Chinese government would like to present as more representative of Chinese society as a whole—Chinese Olympic athletes, of course, but also foreign visitors, including tourists, competing athletes, and dignitaries alike. The discourse being presented is ostensibly one of equality—everyone doing his or her part—but in practice more closely resembles the cynical truism “all are equal, but some are more equal than others.” Giving up their food, their ability to have blood transfusions or surgeries,

even their waking hours are part of the fictional narrative, but such fictional representations also find their footing in real sacrifices made by the Chinese people in the lead-up to the Olympic Games.^[3] Art very much imitates life in this case.

[6] The violence of erasure portrayed in “The Olympic Dream” is one stemming from China's articulation of its own identity being defined in relation to the hegemonic West. “Because relevant sites of global authority (whether the International Olympic Committee or the WTO) continue to be dominated by the West (Chow 1991), the discourses of Asian Olympics reveal the underlying power structures of the encounter between the East and the West.”^[4] The rise of China in the Olympic Games is seen as a way to correct centuries of imperialist domination at the hands of the West, during which time the “sick man of Asia” stereotype—reducing individual Chinese bodies to febrility and the country as a whole to a place of weakness—developed. Modernization and success, then, were to be found in competing on the global stage within parameters defined and perpetuated by Western powers that had for centuries cast China as incapable. Sandra Collins recognizes that in regards to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, “the predominant theme anticipated by the existing narrative appears to be that of China’s successful entrance into—and not dominance of—the world system.”^[5] The immense pressure to succeed manifested as an assertion of a new, normativized Chinese identity, but with this pressure “came a nagging anxiety and insecurity that even the smallest foul-ups in performance or execution of the Games could ruin Beijing’s best-laid plans.”^[6]

[7] Such postsocialist anxieties in China as it engages with the structure of capitalism across borders arise from a contextual conflict of shifting technologies and economics within a framework of increasing urbanization, one in which bodies and spaces intermingle in a way that problematizes the question of the individual. “The Olympic Dream” notes early on that while the fervor over the Olympic Games themselves has been increasing across media and the shared social consciousness, individuals themselves have been disappearing. Old Zhao notes that “the neighborhood he lives in is much quieter these days. No people talking nor dogs barking on the lawn where it used to be boisterous. Perhaps it was because many migrant workers had left the city. It felt weird that some of the neighbors he had known for a dozen years suddenly disappeared, as if they had been dissolved by the fervent Olympic atmosphere.”^[7] They are dissolved into and by the systemic emphasis on creating a shared dream, and in doing so, are silenced.

[8] The ontology of a past-present distinction—as mediated by the hibernation pill which causes characters to lose a month of their lives—poses the question of temporal organization as potentially heterogeneous, in that different characters and individuals within the story experience the organization of time as a reorganization of space in their lived experiences. Party officials and Olympic organizers, as well as foreigner visitors and athletes, are given priority to experience lived time without rupture in a way that the common Beijing citizens are not. These multiple and mutually hostile centers of temporal gravity strain any notion of subjective experience, as the experience of certain actors is valued above others. The chronological subjectivity is positioned within “The Olympic Dream” in such a way that it creates a representation of totality with overlapping, conflicting experiences. For Old Zhao and his friends and

neighbors, removed from the national narrative under the auspices of promoting it, the struggle is between validating national belonging and privileging lived time. An analysis of the difference between simultaneity—recusal as agency—and succession—one narrative following another, with the privileging of one weighted narrative over another—can be found in and borrowed from Kant's contrast between coexistence (simultaneity) and allegorical community, such as, when writing about a house, he says:

I have to show what sort of connection in time belongs to the manifold in the appearances themselves. For instance, the apprehension of the manifold in the appearance of a house which stands before me is successive. The question then arises, whether the manifold of the house is also in itself successive. This, however, is what no one will grant ... that something happens, that something, or a state which did not previously exist, comes to be, cannot be perceived unless it is preceded by an appearance which does not contain in itself this state. For an event which should follow upon an empty time, that is, a coming to be preceded by no state of things, is as little capable of being apprehended as empty time itself.^[8]

[9] Time of any kind, successive or simultaneous, reflects a relation between subjects. Succession can be established as necessarily happening only when a subject acts on its object, so that coexistence, therefore, and complementarily, can only occur between two subjects. Relevant to the relationship to visibility, temporal coexistence demands reciprocity and implies equality, these demands being characteristic of the only necessary apprehensions of perceptions of coexistence that can be known. Old Zhao perceives time only in relation to a time that preceded him, but his inability to perceive what has passed him by does not actually mean that it didn't occur simultaneously.

[10] This collapsing of temporality and perception is also coupled with a specific spatial locatedness, one that is of particular relevance to China's claim to Olympic dominance and lingering anxieties about "measuring up" to the West. In his association of a "third world aesthetic" with the local and a "western aesthetic" with temporality, Frederic Jameson identifies and conflates an ideological collective cultural repression in the juxtaposition of temporally fixed imagery with a "specifically Second-World" aesthetic repression that removes any visual indicators to political systems. The fragmentation of time and place undergone by the residents of Beijing in relation to a constructed world time that erases them results in a perpetual present, one reliant on the construction of a geopolitical aesthetic for a future that can only exist in the erasure of the actual perpetual present. The characters, as representative of the Chinese spatio-temporal consciousness, become obsessed and overloaded with a preoccupation of history; they are bracketed historically, obsessed with history and nostalgia, with "everywhere" and "everywhen" becoming a memorial to what it might signify. It is only and exclusively in the buildup to the 2008 Olympics, obsessed with emerging from a past into a built future, that such a narrative of erasing and, in doing so, perpetuating the present could possibly be constructed.

[11] This atemporal, aspatial alienation from a historicized nationality shows identity to be ephemeral—a mode of attention directed at a disappearing space, at the no-longer or the not-yet there. The influence of globalization and the ability to integrate that identity into a new hybrid, then, becomes an overtly politicized act, one that Jameson has referenced multiple times in his writing on the ethics and ambiguities of geopolitical mapping. "If it is, in reality, capitalism that is the motor force behind the

destructive forms of globalization, then it must be in their capacity to neutralize or transform this particular mode of exploitation that one can best test these various forms of resistance to the West.”^[9]

[12] Yet Old Zhao and the other characters are unable to map either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves—either historically, temporally, or geographically—and subsequently cannot gain any of the critical distance necessary for avoiding being reabsorbed into a capitalist system (even if that system *is* called “Communist with Chinese characteristics”) that commodifies their experiences. Jameson makes it obvious that no return to an anachronistic preindustrial agrarian utopia is sufficient to remove an individual from his or her geospatial symbiosis, leading to a complicit participation in the very system that seeks to make them invisible.

[13] At its core, “The Olympic Dream” presents a structure in which the organizing powers are obsessed with what might best be described as the thoroughly abject spaces of agency, primarily Chinese bodies that cannot maintain their own or the state’s borders. They become abject subjects that can only be dealt with by placing them outside of consideration, both removed from time and from visual representation. As Julia Kristeva writes in *The Powers of Horror*, the abject is “not lack of cleanliness or health [...] but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders [...]. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”^[10] In terms of the degradation and degeneracy theories of the Chinese body associated with the trope of the “sick man of Asia,” the common people of this short story are seen as an illness within the body politic of China. To present a unified, healthy, idealized front, the degraded parts must be excised from the narrative that China is presenting to the world. Old Zhao’s neighborhood representative, Ms. Zhou, paints this explicitly in terms of cleanliness and hygiene when she says, “The Olympic Games are coming closer each day. It is a symbol of our country rising up and it could wash away its shame over the past hundred years. So I’ve come to ask you what you are thinking about it.”^[11] The threat of contagion presented here comes from inside the body politic; rather than a fear of the permeability of boundaries as made possible by the Olympic Games, the risk comes from within and poses the threat of the impossibility of containment. Rather than presenting an external threat that menaces from without, the fear is that some internal degradation will spread to the external visitors.

[14] In order to erase the individuals and promote the success of the body politic, the narrative relies on collapsing distinctions, especially those distinctions of scale that separate cell, body, and geography, but also temporal distinctions between past and present. The Chinese bodies are presented as reminders of a pre-modern time, one that holds China as a whole back from taking its rightful place among the globalized world. Their bodies become sites of anachronism, wherein to exist and be aware is in and of itself to retard the geopolitical collective which they make up.

[15] The boundary collapse between the nation and the individual is a result of the privatization of the titular science-fictional invention of the hibernation pill, which allows individuals to sleep for a month without any ill effects. During their hibernation, individuals need not perform any of the normal biological functions of a human body; they have no need to eat, drink, or expel waste, and—as the doctor assures Old Zhao—any preexisting illness or wound will not increase in severity while the individual is under the

effect of the pill. The permeability of boundaries and effacement of public/private spheres as a result of the erasure of the body in order to promote the public good leads to suspicion at the same time as a new opening-up to the outside world. Only those Beijing citizens who are unable to leave—that is, trapped within the city—are given the hibernation pill, while, paradoxically, those who are on the outside are invited to enter and inhabit the city in a nod towards both globalization and bodily porosity. That globalization itself is, in fact, what allows for infection and invasion. In imagining threats from the inside as menacing the outside—as opposed to vice versa—this discourse on boundaries forms the basis of paranoid narratives of a contagious world that calls for increasing levels of scrutiny. Yet such infection and invasion are necessary to China's growth and assumption of global power; it is the people inside the system who are seen as the problem while the success of the Olympics themselves is predicated upon outside involvement. The very global network that allows the crossing of borders—cellular, individual, national, global, structural—is the same one that allows for the crossing of contagions (here, those problematic citizens), and it necessitates both a broader and wider scrutiny (structurally-dependent nation-building) alongside more penetrating and closer investigation (the effects of medicine on a frail old man, Old Zhao's father). The conflation of the individual and the public means that all levels of borders collapse in upon themselves, so that the cell, body, society, nation, and globe all become similarly meaningless concepts of scope, collapsing embodiment and geography into one.

[16] Not only do we see a radical loss of collective and individual orientation by depriving geography of identity and replacing physical place with a pill-induced other space in which individuals exist only liminally and can be considered alive only in the sense that they are not explicitly dead, but the recasting of the individual as a potentially degraded individual cell within the body politic points towards the absence of "real" reference for what might be accepted as a 'standard' body, as well as the unstable nature of the body itself. Informing the question of identity in the postmodern condition is the predicate of temporal locatedness, as opposed to a physical, grounded, or embodied referent. Sadeq Rahimi describes this as "the signifier preceding the signified," where the technologically-bounded self resides in "a continuous state of construction and reconstruction."^[12] In this construction of the nation as a single body, with internal threats seen as deeply pathological, individualized sentiment towards protecting the body politic is co-opted by the characters of "Olympic Dream," who accept their place in a system that necessitates their being pushed aside.

[17] The subjectivity of the individual, then, is to be found in the indices and Derridean traces left behind by the erasure of the actual physical body. The invisible leaves its own trace—how do we measure an identity?—but the exterior is destroyed. The characters in "Olympic Dream" ultimately have no bodies in that their physical absence from the narrative allows for its climax, yet the desire to see the collective national body succeed leads to the destruction of the subject who can only be represented as an invisible corporeality. The erasure of Old Zhao and his family and neighbors from Beijing's international glory and its evocation of epistemic violence, however, relies fundamentally on the very liminality of that squinting modifier present in such epistemic violence to evoke a subjectivity that is seen as it sees and speaks in the act of silence.

[18] While the story itself relies on as-yet unrealized biomedical technologies to create its vision of a Beijing emptied of Chinese bodies, it draws on a long historical narrative of pathology to do so. Researchers such as Ari Heinrich have written elsewhere about the changing visual culture of late Qing China that led to new methods of conceptualizing the diseased Chinese body and its interiority. Central to Heinrich's analysis of the fundamental shift in Chinese visibility is Benjamin Hobson's *A New Treatise on Anatomy*, which, when it was published in China in 1850, was the first Western-style anatomy text to be widely distributed. Hobson set out with the specific intention of correcting the "confused and erroneous"^[13] medical practices he saw as indicative of Chinese medicine, with a specific focus on anatomical diagrams. Heinrich notes, "Where Chinese conventions prioritized a sort of metaphorical approach to the graphic representation of the body, Hobson's anatomy imposed a decidedly literal prerogative, emphasizing the visual over the conceptual, somatic 'reality' over the schematic."^[14] Heinrich notes the repeated emphasis by Hobson on exterior surfaces in order to establish a corporal interior. The outer skin is labeled, given dimensionality and substantial shading in order to "signify exposure and dimension, to establish an interior and an exterior, and then to draw the viewer's eye inward."^[15] Hobson, in short, is asking his reader to adopt not just new anatomical information but a radically different visual and cognitive framework that emphasizes such ideas as the "interior" and "exterior," just as "The Olympic Dream" breaks down the distinction between the body as the nation and the body as the individual.

[19] The emphasis here, then, is on the disassociation of earlier ways of conceptualizing the body to one based explicitly on penetration. Rather than imaging the body, it had to be cut into, dissected, and taken apart in order to understand it as a real object. As a framework for understanding a constructed reality, Hobson claims the cross-section "pretends to go beyond what the eye can see, claiming to conceive of structures that would be difficult to reach even with the help of the anatomist's knife, and providing a very privileged, if nonexistent, vantage point."^[16] Realism was constructed in order to replace expression and the conception of interiority through representation, enabling an epistemological "anatomic realism" that renounced the metaphoric ontology of its predecessors and opening a new mode of representation that promised to penetrate to the very heart of the pathologized Chinese figure. It is this inherently pathologized body, spatially collapsed to a component of the state as a whole, which must be repressed in order to ensure national health. To cut into the body is to see it, rousing the anxieties of the Chinese government and the individual citizens that the outside world peering in would see a past history of shame. It was therefore necessary to cut out the sick parts of the body politic in order to promote the health of the country as a whole.

[20] Yet the collapsing and excision of the body as a component, which is then repressed from the master narrative, is authorized by the state but carried out by the individuals themselves, who are problematically bound into a relationship that does not allow for full agency yet recognizes that their willing cooperation with the mechanics of a grand national narrative has been formed and co-opted by the state in the very process of formation. To locate subjectivity in a denial that the characters willingly take the hibernation pill presented to them in order to do their part to promote China's rise to global

power is reductive and ignores that, within a Jamesonian totality, there is no fixed and individual figure that we can pointedly identify as the responsible party. Rather, to analyze the involvement of Old Zhao and his friends and neighbors in their own process of erasure, in physically removing themselves from the lived experience of the Olympic Games, is to question the relationship between investment, self-estrangement, and self-articulation.

[21] The complicity of the characters in their own erasure can be read through the lens of Feng-Mei Heberer's concept of an "aesthetics of precarity,"^[17] or the way in which the fracturing of state and economic powers replicates itself in everyday modes of self-regulation. Engaging with subjectivity at this level is often wedded to dominant state and market forces, in which the logic of affective labor—the work of transcribing a chronically devalued working body into a recognized subjecthood—designates whatever investment is necessary on the part of the devalued body seeking recognition to maintain a viable "self," with all its attendant borders and boundaries. While necessitating an understanding of self care, it is also inextricably tied to state power: "Having lived all his life in Beijing, Old Zhao knew that the Olympic Games were a dream that the Chinese people had held for a hundred years. He wished the Games success from the bottom of his heart."^[18]

[22] The average citizens of the Beijing in "The Olympic Dream" have, in their own way, internalized two things: one, that they themselves are individual components of the state as a body, and two, that they are components that do not promote progress. They have internalized and integrated the "sick man of Asia" stereotype of the pathologized body, but on a restrictive and selective basis—just as not all individual cells within a sick body are actually themselves sick, so, too, not all Chinese citizens within the body politic are degraded. It is a testament to the totalizing force of the state that Old Zhao and those in his neighborhood have all accepted that, in order to do their part in making China great, they are detrimental to national health and must self-select out of it. Insofar as their opting-out is temporary, it is also precarious. To be recognized as having done their part for the state and thus being bestowed with subjecthood, they must enact policies of self-regulation that restrict them from full participation and, in doing so, paradoxically participate in the system—an act of double-think with which they are portrayed as only too happy to engage.

[23] Yet those opting out of the system in order to participate in it aren't privileged with any newly articulated knowledge or access to power. In fact, in a discursive move within the structure of the text itself, they are shown to be further estranged from more agential engagement in the national body than ever before. Consider the following excerpt, taken immediately after Old Zhao has woken up—a month of missing time separating his newly aware consciousness from the moment he took the hibernation pill.

"Auntie, are the Games over?" he [Old Zhao] asked.

"I heard that they are over. I myself just woke up yesterday," the elderly lady answered.

"They are over. I heard that it was very successful," another neighbor^[19] said.

"I heard that China won more gold medals than any other country in the world," a vegetable vendor said.

"Yes. I also heard that. China won more than 40 gold medals," another person said.

"I heard that not even a tiny accident had happened during the Games," one said.

"I heard that the air quality was very good during those days."

"I heard that the Chinese team took all the gold medals in Ping Pong and Diving."

"I heard that the Chinese men's soccer team did not get a single goal again."

"I heard that Liu Xiang broke the world record,"

"I heard that there was algae in the sea near Qingdao, so all sailing competitions moved to the Kunming Lake."

"I heard that the president of the International Olympic Committee said that the Beijing Olympic Games were the most successful in the history of the Olympics."

"Yes, we Chinese had a big show this time. I heard that all foreigners were awed. The Olympic Games have never been so successful before."

[24] News of the success of the national dream is deferred, a deferral in which time itself becomes a discursive function that is knowingly withheld and put off by removing individuals from it. Their month of missing time is not only a personally historic rupture, but also a blank spot on the map of cognitive functioning for the nation as a whole. If the Chinese people occupying Beijing are the diseased bodies that must be excised, then certainly by removing them from the national consciousness they no longer have firsthand didactic memory of it and can only repeat possibilities. Their conception of a future in which China has become powerful is predicated upon a past that is constructed from expectations, hope, and handed-down hearsay, as depicted through the anonymous reports being accorded Old Zhao. It is significant that the reports aren't credited to individual speakers; erasing their names from the narrative reduces them to a nameless cacophony of impossible-to-verify statements.

[25] Note that the accreditation of names and identities becomes increasingly nebulous and anonymous as this short passage progresses. It begins with Old Zhao, recently awakened from his slumber, addressing someone by title: "Auntie." Within the text itself, her response is identified by her description—"elderly lady"—moving away from her title to a description. The next response is an increasingly vague "another neighbor," with no identifying characteristics other than the fact that he or she is other than the original elderly Auntie. In the same identificatory vein as "elderly neighbor," a vegetable vendor is the next person identified by his or her adjectival characteristics, rather than a proper name or personage. This is followed up by reports from "another person" and the simple pronoun "one" before the utterances becomes completely unattributed altogether.

[26] There is a strongly negative correlation between the specificity of the speaker and the generality of his or her claim. At the same time that the attributions become less and less precise, the claims being made as to China's Olympic success become increasingly specific and increasingly grandiose. Auntie, for example, at the beginning of the excerpt, simply states that the games are over. The next person corroborates that they are over, but further adds that they were quite successful. Similarly, the vegetable vendor claims that not only were the games successful, but that China won more gold medals than any

other country in the world. The next speaker, “another person,” clarifies the vegetable vendor’s statement to clarify that not only did China win more gold medals than any other country, it specifically won forty gold medals. The claims about the games go on to become increasingly explicit, naming specific sports, athletes, and locations by their proper names (ping pong and diving, Liu Xiang, and Qingdao and Kunming Lake, respectively) and claiming that outside authorities noted it as the most successful games in history. As the individuals of the country fade to the background of the narrative, their proclamations rise to the front, the claims of specific national greatness effacing the invisible and anonymous speakers and occurring at their expense. To speak the nation’s greatness into being is to commit an act of visibility-erasing violence upon the speaker, so that one must be produced at the expense of the other, without the possibility of concurrence. The invisible labor enacted by the speakers in the production of the Olympic Games mirrors their mass erasure in the rush towards modernity enacted by China at large, which relies on the mobilization of masses of unacknowledged individuals that build the country by self-selectively and narratively retreating from the narrative of progress.

[27] The conspiratorial fear that the State is out to get the individual—only after getting what they want, of course—here proves to be founded in fact, with the government prescribing pills to literally remove the Chinese population from the city. As mentioned earlier in this article, not all the individuals in “The Olympic Dream” are erased in this way, however: only the citizens who, for one reason or another, have not yet left or cannot leave at all—Old Zhao, for example, cannot leave because his father is incapacitated in the hospital, but many (if not most) of the citizens are literally trapped as the city develops around them. The urban poor are contrasted with the actress Xu Dong’e, who is widely praised for publically announcing that she will remain outside the city for the duration of the games. Yet those without the means to do so are trapped within the city without the economic recourse to escape. The government has restricted the usage of cars—first “only half of the city’s vehicles, alternating between odd and even license plate numbers, could get on the road each day,” but following air quality tests, “only when the last number of its license plate identified with the date”^[20]—so that of those who own cars in the first place, only one in ten can use the city’s automotive infrastructure at any given point in time. Those using bicycles, either as their primary mode of transportation or in lieu of their normal car, such as Old Zhao, are subjected to frequent inspections at almost every intersection. The city itself conspires to keep them trapped and immobilized, so even when fleeing the city is lauded, they are physically and claustrophobically trapped within it. The paranoia of urban infrastructure is a conspiracy being played out in real time that works to trap them by reason of their economic mobility and mobility as made possible by economic position—the lowest rungs of citizens are victims of a structural conspiracy in a very literal sense. It is not only the totalizing forces of a Jamesonian capitalism that arrest their social movement, but a real and measurable juridical policy that conspires to keep them immobilized at the heart of the city.

[28] The spatio-temporal rupture of amnesiac nation building evinced by Old Zhao and the other Beijing citizens in “The Olympic Dream” therefore becomes a collective unconsciousness along the lines of the logic of the collective imaginary. Only by looking at the mass can the underlying logic of an inexplicable system be hinted at; the unconsciousness of the people and the system inverts our understanding of who or what is contained within the system itself. Instead of individual components making up the system

—as one might imagine each individual playing his or her role to keep the megalith going—rather, the system is embedded in each individual, so that they become part of a globally unconscious network. This evinces a shift from a spatialized interior to an unconscious structural reification of the state and the permeability of bodily boundaries at the same time that borders are being drawn around the structure. The individual—Old Zhao, his wife, his father, every Beijing citizen (老北京人)—is subsumed into the network and, in propagating said network, loses him or herself to it. The responsibility—and the subsequent honor following in the wake of success—conceptually belongs to each citizen, but their individual identities are blurred into a mass of “we, the citizenry,” as the following real-world quote by a Chinese policeman in Lhasa, Tibet indicates: “The Chinese people have made great efforts and overcome many difficulties for the hosting of the Olympic Games. The success of the Beijing Games has enhanced the national cohesion. As Chinese, we all feel very very proud.”^[21]

[29] While the desire to represent that which is invisible ties together the disparate artworks and theorizations of capitalism’s totality—which is so vast that it becomes unrepresentable and incomprehensible—it also relies upon a fundamental lie: that any attempt to cognitively map a city and its citizen is able to represent any objective truth at all. The policeman’s quote, located as it is in the interstices of a politically- and ideologically-contested ethnic, regional, and religious area and using a “we” that encompasses everyone under one nationalist umbrella, creates a map of identity and agency that is potentially disconnected from very real lines of division. In “The Olympic Dream,” Old Zhao, too, creates such a cognitive map when he takes on the individual responsibility of physically removing himself from a newly conceptualized Beijing that is emptied of actual Beijingers. Engaging with individual artistic works that themselves grapple with both literal and figurative cartography as a way to visually identify the place an individual or group occupies in the capitalist world system, emphasis is given to visuality as a form of comprehension. “Seeing is believing” seems to be the only way to move past flat ontologies and examine the spatialized role of Old Zhao and the other Beijing citizens. In addressing the postmodern crisis of representation and the disparate ways we struggle to make visible the dark geographies of capitalism, we may want to briefly consider mapping—both literal and metaphorical—as one way to engage with the immense structural scale of erasure experienced by these characters. While we may recognize that the enactment of labor of the Beijing people towards national promotion is in itself being erased, the fact that their physical bodies are actually visually removed from the sight of visitors and august persons is itself notable.

[30] Most notable, perhaps, in situating Old Zhao and his actions within a cognitive map of Beijing and the 2008 Olympic Games is the concept that maps do not *represent* anything, they *produce* a thing, and that is The State. Rather than an ontological certainty, maps are metaphors for accuracy, yet are inherently selective in their appearance as a totality. Standardization itself involves a process of erasure and, in the context of Chinese social mapping, portrays an ahistoricizing tendency by the Chinese state. As early as the 18th century there was a split between ethnography and cartography under the Qing Empire that standardized a specific spatial representation that removed individuals from the map.^[22] If we look back as far as Mercator’s 1596 projection of a universal framework and universally-stable projection of the world, it is easy to see how creating boundaries that encompass the state while excluding the people can

be seen as an *a priori* precedent for the events of “The Olympic Dream.” While erasure produces certain ways of seeing to the exclusion of others, it visualizes something as stable that is, in fact, inherently unstable. By enrolling individuals in a “universally-interpretable” logic of state constitution, the networks of knowledge are constituted by those who are excluded from themselves being represented—as seen in Old Zhao’s willingness to support the state through his own self-erasure.

[31] The process of postmodern navigation of the totality can then be understood as having itself contributed to a radical loss of collective and individual orientation by depriving geography of identity and replacing physical place with virtual space. The example of the changing definition of the meter^[23] illustrates the absence of 'real' reference for what has come to be accepted as a 'standard' unit, as well as the unstable nature of the unit itself. Informing the question of identity in the postmodern condition is the predicate of temporal locatedness, as opposed to a physical, grounded, or embodied referent. If, then, the signifier precedes the signified, where the postmodern self resides is in a continuous state of construction and reconstruction. It is the work of a knowledge network, then, to train individuals and organizations how to read a map (metaphorically or otherwise) and to enroll the readers in the knowledge structures being produced, with work going into extending some networks rather than others. The sheer immensity of the totalizing force of capitalism as a world system, however, means that representation — outside of an impossible Borgesian total map — is impossible. How do we conceptualize a space and a history in which the Bird's Nest and the Water Cube still stand as sites of interest, but are completely divorced from their official use-value? How do we visualize a Beijing empty of Beijing citizens?

[32] As such, the praxis of making labor invisible is, itself, laid bare in this short story. As opposed to the totalizing forces of capitalism—which are so broad as to be imperceptible—“The Olympic Dream” literally introduces a biotechnological narrative device to remove the story of individual labor and named agency from the public narrative of social progress. The characters, in voluntarily removing themselves from interacting with the city and its temporally specific influx of foreigners, enact their own labor through abstention. Their invisibility is, in fact, nothing new, especially when considering the interaction between what have historically been constructed as “third world” and “first world” narratives—it is only the mode of erasure that becomes more visible here in the form of a pill. As professed by a Beijing journalist discussing the site of the Games, “Beijing [is] more appealing to others because we have such a long history; we have something you have never seen, something very native, something very Oriental. (Haugen 2005)”^[24] It is that, specifically—the never-seen, the native—that must continue to be excised from the narrative for China to become the great Olympic power it has so long dreamed itself to be.

[33] In “The Olympic Dream,” the 2008 Beijing Olympics serve as a focal point for critique predicated upon the erasure of the individual citizen—and his or her arguably voluntary participation in such a system—in the success of the national dream. While the biopolitical reality of a hibernation pill is science fiction only, the erasure of individuals and the space left behind by absent Chinese bodies was a very real phenomenon during the actual event. Yet lingering historical anxieties about global power and prestige meant that the event was widely portrayed in national media as symbolizing both the end of

centuries of humiliation and victimization at the hands of the West and the beginning of a new global era of prosperity in which all Chinese citizens could participate. The erasure itself signified success, and the lingering collective impression of the Games, despite their sublimation of agency, is echoed in the last line of "The Olympic Dream," as Old Zhao tearfully tells his wife: "Hey Boss, go outside to listen to what people are saying when you are finished with the noodles, I heard that...I heard that... our nation has finally become powerful now."^[25]

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Notes

1. The process by which the image of China as pathologically sick or diseased, leading to what many Chinese scholars consider to be the "Century of Humiliation," is discussed in detail in Ari Heinrich's *The Afterlife of Images: Translating the Pathological Body between China and the West*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008. Print.
2. An overview of the Chinese thirst for Olympic gold as a method of dispelling perceived national disgrace can be found in Josh Rudolf's "China's Olympic Fetish for First." *China Digital Times (CDT)*. 3 Aug. 2012.
3. For example, see the following excerpt of a news article regarding the limitations on blood transfusions and operations for Beijing citizens as indicative:
绝不是“市民为运动员让路”
卫生部专家表示，出台这样的措施，是基于4点考虑。首先，在遇到大的事件时，先救治生命处于危险状态的病人或急重患者，择期安排其他手术，这是遵循国际医疗救治的惯例。其次，从适用范围看，可择期手术的患者，在一两个月内不做手术不会对其病情产生影响。第三，推迟部分手术，不能看成是普通市民为运动员让路。因为在奥运期间，不只有运动员来北京，还将有大量外国及外地的普通游客来京。这个措施是为这部分激增的人群做准备。最后，这个措施只是一种准备，到时候是否会有具体的手术被推迟，还要看当时的情况而定。
<http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2008-07-05/155415877854.shtml>
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5. *ibid.* p. 188
6. Cha, Victor D. "Politics And The Olympic Transaction: Measuring China's Accomplishments." *International Journal Of The History Of Sport* 27.14-15 (2010): 2359-2379. p. 2363.
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 13. Heinrich, Ari. *The Afterlife of Images: Translating the Pathological Body between China and the West*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008. P. 120
 14. Ibid, p. 133.
 15. Ibid, p. 129.
 16. Ibid, p. 155.
 17. Heberer, Feng-Mei. "Economies of Self-Articulation: On the Making of Surplus Lives and Visible Selves in Me Llamo Peng." *Asia-Theory-Visuality Conference — The Invisible*. Princeton University, Jones Hall, Princeton, NJ 08540. Nov. 14, 2015. Conference Presentation.
 18. Wang, You. "The Olympic Dream: A Sci-Fi Short Story." *China Digital Times*. Trans. Linjun Fan. 1 Aug. 2008.
 19. Note that in the original Chinese, "Auntie" is translated from "大妈" and "another neighbor" is "另一位大妈," or "another elderly aunt/woman," not simply "neighbor."
 20. Wang, You. "The Olympic Dream: A Sci-Fi Short Story." *China Digital Times*. Trans. Linjun Fan. 1 Aug. 2008.
 21. Cha, Victor D. "Politics And The Olympic Transaction: Measuring China's Accomplishments." *International Journal Of The History Of Sport* 27.14-15 (2010): 2359-2379. p. 2360.
 22. In *Qing Colonial Enterprise*, Laura Hostetler lays out how simultaneous developments in modes of representation in both cartography and ethnography—particularly their emphasis on direct observation and visual representation—were part of a colonial enterprise to catalogue and control territory as part of an imperial bid to participate in a global world order. See: Hostetler, Laura. *Qing Colonial Enterprise: Ethnography and Cartography in Early Modern China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.
 23. In 1793, the French government decided the meter would be defined as 10⁻⁷ of the earth's quadrant passing through Paris, and even though it was quickly recognized that this length had been misidentified, the unit continued to be used. Over the years the meter was further redefined as a non-geographical space, like the distance between the peaks of the sine waves of a certain type of light, to a final [for now] definition that refers directly to time as the unit for measuring space. The meter is defined currently as "the length of the path travelled by light in vacuum during a time interval of 1/299,792,458 of a second."
 24. Collins, Sandra. "The Fragility Of Asian National Identity In The Olympic Games." In *Owning the Olympics: Narratives of the New China*, eds. Price, Monroe E., and Daniel Dayan. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008. p. 223.
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