

OLYMPIC DESIGN AND NATIONAL HISTORY: THE CASES OF TOKYO 1964 AND BEIJING 2008*

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The Olympic Games are processes of “nation building,” through which nations become aware of their distinct identity values and take opportunities to send new messages about their status to the rest of the world. This paper describes how some of the graphic design material of the Tokyo 1964 and the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games visually articulated the investment of national content in the newly modernized identities of Japan in 1964 and China in 2008, through different uses of historical references.

The Tokyo 1964 Olympic Games were presented in both national and international narratives as events that heralded Japan’s postwar modernization process in an environment of peace and demilitarization. Through the Olympics, the Japanese government sought to be accepted in an international community that had excluded its country for eighteen years, due to its role in the Pacific War. Tokyo 1964 displayed faith in technology, rationalization and consumer society, and its graphic design projects have been seen as emblematic of this era. Most of these projects were designed by important Japanese designers following the rules of modern design, and were granted international recognition.

The Beijing 2008 Games operated in the current era, in which China has been undergoing a new modernization process that converges with the capitalist model of development. The Olympics were intended to highlight China’s change after thirty years of economic reforms, as well as its eagerness to overcome its past humiliation and losses due to foreign hostility. As Susan Brownell has observed, for China, the Olympics “symbolically link economic modernization, Chinese nationalism, and Communist Party legitimacy into a meaningful totality.”¹ Design was employed as a means of bringing to the fore China’s past glory and strength, thus becoming a vehicle for expressing the new synergy of nationalism and marketization within the framework of globalization and post-revolutionary discourse.

Tokyo 1964 design has been regarded as emblematic of Japan’s postwar modernity, heralding a historic rupture with Japan’s prewar era. On the contrary, the design of the Beijing Olympics has been regarded as a means of expressing China’s return to history, a signal of the country’s regaining of its former powerful world status. Contrary to these perceptions, however, I will argue that the historic rupture that Japanese Olympic design declared from the controversial epoch of Japanese imperialism, and the historic continuity that Chinese design is trying to establish with China’s past, are only apparent. Japanese Olympic design from 1964 is in many ways a continuation and restatement of prewar tendencies, while the restoration of the

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¹ Susan Brownell, *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People’s Republic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 10.

historic past that Chinese Olympic design sought could not be achieved without a parallel historic rupture.

Graphic Design for the Tokyo 1964 Olympic Games

Most graphic design projects of the Tokyo 1964 Games were directed by the design critic Katsumi Masaru, who headed a team of several important designers, including Hara Hiromu, Kamekura Yusaku, Kōno Tadashi and Tanaka Ikko. The team saw the Olympics as an opportunity to establish a design language in Japan along the lines of Otto Neurath's concept of the isotype, a symbolic way of presenting information via easily interpretable icons that work without written language. As stated by Katsumi, the group's main policy was to design the official emblem and secure its consistent use, to apply the five colors of the Olympic rings to different design applications, to determine the Olympic colors (supervised by Kōno Takashi), to design the symbols of the various games and facilities (that came to be known as pictograms), and to ensure a uniformed approach to typography (supervised by Hara Hiromu).² This was the first time that a "total design" approach was used in the Olympics. This method was facilitated by the "design guide sheet," which provided an overall set of principles that the designers had to follow rather than proceed with random graphic applications. A major success of the team's work was its truly collective effort. As Katsumi stated, "it was the first time that young Japanese designers worked so much for an international event since the International Design Conference. ... Design was not done by a 'star system,' but by team work."³

Since 1959, Japanese graphic designers were concerned about "what graphic designers can do for the Olympics." In a discussion that year titled "Designers' social awareness" (Dezaina Shakai Ishiki),⁴ Kamekura Yusaku noted the importance of communication design, especially concerning the visits of foreigners who would not understand language-based Japanese signs:

We have to create a way to communicate visually, and unify the railway, so that when you look at a symbol, you know where you are going. Town names might have to be converted into numerical system such as 100, 108....⁵

Since Japan had not adopted the principles of the International Traffic Signs, introduced at the United Nations Geneva conference in 1949 and accepted by most European countries, the Olympics were regarded by graphic designers as an opportunity to establish a more unified and internationally legible symbolic language across the country. It was along these lines, searching for universally understood visual languages, that pictograms (*ekotoba* in Japanese, a word used prior to the design of pictograms) were for the first time designed for the Olympic Games (Figure 1), embodying at the same time Baron de Coubertin's aspirations of universalism.

² Masaru Katsumi, *Katsumi Masaru Chosakushu-Dai 3 kan*, Gurafiku dezain (Writings by Masaru Katsumi 3 Graphic Design). Tokyo: Kodansha, 1986, p. 134.

³ Katsumi, p. 199.

⁴ Maemura Fumihiko. 'Hinomaru to Modan: 64 Tokyo Daien Shinboru Maku to Posuta o Megutte' (The Rising Sun Flag and Modernism: 1964 Tokyo Olympics Symbol Mark & Poster), pp. 132-47. In Shimizu Satoshi (ed.), *Orinpikku sutadizu: fukusu no keiken fukusu no seiji* (Olympic Studies: Multiple Experiences, Multiple Politics). Tokyo: Serikashobo, 2004, p. 135.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

FIG 1



Note: Tokyo 1964 Pictograms, designed by Yoshiro Yamashita, © IOC

Katsumi thought of the pictograms as the greatest achievement of his work for the graphic design of the Tokyo 1964 Olympics, and presented the result to “to the international society as a common cultural heritage.”⁶ Since the 1961 Japan Advertising Artists Club (JAAC), “a shift from commercial works to public service or welfare” and a broader dislike of the term “commercial design,” in favor of terms such as “visual design” and “visual communications” were notable.⁷ One of the major contributions of the pictogram design in Japan was the shift in the perception of symbol design (and especially of the logo design of large corporations such as banks) from an entity that was previously seen as disposable to one of everlasting magnitude and utility.

The design of the 1964 pictograms was praised by international critics and designers. As British critic Stanley Mason wrote in the Swiss magazine *Graphis*:⁴

Symbols such as international traffic signs need to be easily understood, accepted by authorities and civil citizens, and be practical. This was achieved in 1964 at the Tokyo Olympic Game. Few tourists understood Japanese. Other languages were not commonly

⁶ Katsumi, p. 171.

⁷ Uemura Takachiyo, ‘Criticism of the JAAC exhibition,’ *Idea*, 1961, p. 4.

used. The Olympic committee took this problem seriously, and new designers led by Katsumi Masaru designed game symbols and other signs. I hope that these symbols will be used in the next games so that they will be polished to be the perfect universal visual language.⁸

These early pictograms continued to be improved until the Munich 1972 Games, with the involvement of designer Otto Aicher, and were followed by new pictograms for subsequent Games.

A major task of the Japanese design team of the 1960s was to de-traditionalize Japanese visual languages by subscribing to the abstract, non-iconic principles of the modern movement, found also to be more appropriate for expressing the new corporate identities of postwar Japan. As designer Ohchi Hiroshi had stated, until the 1950s Japanese art works most appreciated by international circles were “Mt Fuji, the geishas, pagodas, chrysanthemums. ... all a distorted picture of [Japan’s] artistic output abroad.”⁹ For designers of the 1960s, the new status of the country appeared encoded in signs, geometries and abstract patterns, rather than in the exoticized or feminized metaphors of Japan that had contributed to its subordination to the West. This became especially obvious in three of the Olympic posters that carried no obvious references to Japanese identity, unlike earlier representations of a passive and feminized Japan. All posters were designed by Kamekura Yusaku. A prominent figure in Japanese design, Kamekura had studied composition theory at the Shin Kenchiku Kōgei Gakuin (New Academy of Architecture and Industrial Arts) in Tokyo — an institute of architecture and applied arts that fostered a curriculum inspired by the Bauhaus — and was a cofounder of the Japanese Advertising Artists’ Club (Nihon Senden Bijutsu Kai—JAAC) and of the Nippon Design Center (1960).

The second Tokyo 1964 poster,¹⁰ “The Start of Sprinters Dash,” carried a full-bleed photograph shot at the National Stadium, figuring athletes of the American Forces stationed at the Tachikawa Air Base as well as amateur Japanese athletes (Figure 2). As Maggie Kinser-Saiki has remarked,

had artificially blacking out the background been an option in 1964, the first Olympic poster to use a photograph might have been created with much less effort. In a stadium naturally darkened by nightfall, six runners in various events spent hours making staggered false starts toward a line at which a commercial photographer inexperienced in sports photography aimed a telephoto lens. He took 80 exposures at 1/1000th of a second. Only one had the power of an Olympic poster.¹¹

Kamekura also collaborated with the two photographers for the execution of the final two posters: the third, “A Butterfly-Swimmer,” carrying a photograph taken at the Tokyo Metropolitan Indoor Swimming Pool with Waseda University’s swimmer Iwamoto Koji, and the fourth, “The Olympic Torch Runner,” figuring Juntendo University’s athlete Tanaka. For both, the expression of technical achievement was paramount. Kamekura said for the third poster:

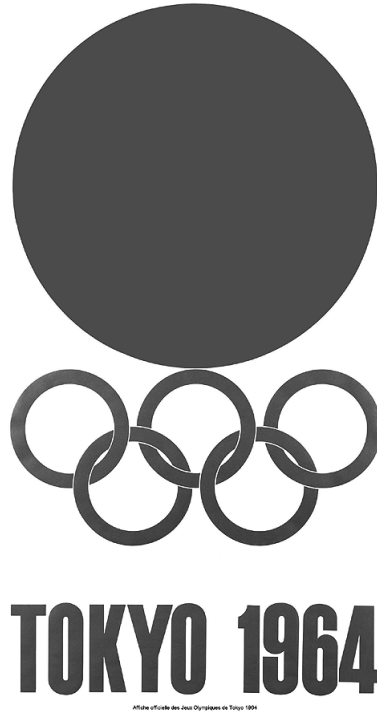
⁸ Katsumi, p. 134.

⁹ Hiroshi Ohchi, ‘On Japanese posters.’ In *International Poster Annual*. Teufen: Arthur Niggli & Willy Verkanf, 1954, p. 9.

¹⁰ The first poster carried the Olympic emblem, which will be discussed below.

¹¹ Maggie Kinser-Saiki, *12 Japanese Masters*. New York: Graphis, 2002, p.23.

FIG 2



Note: Tokyo 1964 Emblem, designed by Kamekura Yusaku, © IOC

For the swimming photograph, we had to build a camera stand in the water so the swimmer could approach at full speed. During the filming the photo director used a staff of ten persons. First we tried to get a photo of free-style swimming, but at such a fast shutter speed the water looked like ice and the swimmer like a cadaver. So then we tried the head-on symmetry of the butterfly stroke.¹²

The fourth poster, which became the official poster of the 1964 Olympics, had a composition different from the previous ones. Kamekura described it this way:

In this official poster for the Tokyo Olympics I tried to suggest both the austerity of sports and the excitement of a festival. ... There were only a few minutes late each afternoon when we could get the light conditions we wanted in order to show clearly both the torch and the runner's features, but after three days we finally got the shot we wanted. The lettering and emblem were arranged in the form of a cross to give a religious atmosphere.¹³

¹² Kamekura, Yusaku, *The Graphic Design of Yusaku Kamekura*. New York: Weatherhill, 1973, p. 173.

¹³ Kamekura, 1973, p. 174.

Even though notions of “Japaneseness” are difficult to decipher in the photographic posters, this is not the case with the design of the Olympic emblem. As it will become obvious in the discussion below, despite declarations to the contrary, notions of locality and nationalism were not absent in the Tokyo Olympic design. Whether this was an internal demand for differentiation, an expression of local pride, or a role that Japanese designers felt they had to satisfy as members of a nation on the periphery is a moot point. To be sure, the search for elements in a country’s history that could be integrated with its distinct version of modernity, beyond the apparent ahistoricism of orthodox modernism, has been common to many countries. At the same time, the very belief that Japanese tradition carried formal affinities with the principles of modern design were key to the history of modernism, after the travels of important figures such as Bruno Taut and Frank Lloyd Wright to Japan in the early twentieth century.

Tokyo 1964 Olympic Emblem

A competition for the design of the Olympic emblem was announced in 1960 for which six designers were invited to participate: Inagaki Kôichiro, Kamekura Yusaku, Kôno Takashi, Nagai Kazumasa, Sugiura Koohei, and Tanaka Ikko. After the submission of forty designs, on June 10th, one of Kamekura’s proposals was chosen. The entries to the emblem competition were in no way uniform; rather, we can notice in them a variety of styles that range from modern to historicist, such as those by Tanaka Ikko and Kôno Tadashi, the first with an entry strongly reminiscent of a Japanese *mon* (crest design), and the second with two entries, one carrying an icon of Mt. Fuji and the other a Japanese fan. Kamekura’s winning design, which was undoubtedly the most modern design, was a bold symmetrical vertical composition that consisted of the five Olympic rings in their original colors, the phrase “Tokyo 1964” in gold sans-serif typography, and most notably a large circle in red (Figure 3).¹⁴ Kamekura Yusaku designed the emblem in consultation with typographer Hara Hiromu. The emblem had numerous applications, from the first poster to the diplomas, tickets, and medals of the Games.

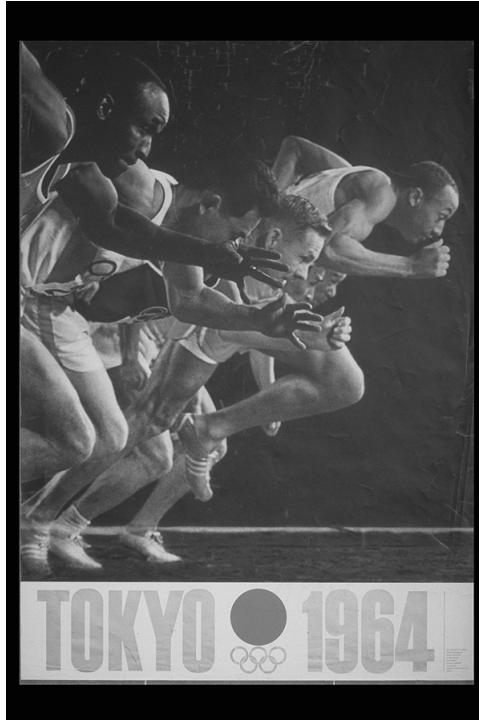
To be sure, Kamekura was a strong advocate of modernism and intrenationalism. Kamekura has often commented on the impact American products had on his conception of design and modernity, especially as he became familiar with them during the American Occupation:

Many rectangular boxes were discarded on station platforms by American soldiers. They were the empty containers for combat rations, and they were decorated by some abstract designs in blue. ... I picked up some of them and took them home. Displaying them on shelves, I felt as though a fresh air of civilization and culture was suddenly filling my room. From the bottom of my heart I thought: this is civilization, this is design, this is the joy of living. I spoke of this experience at the International Design Conference held in New York in 1958, where I gave a speech as a guest lecturer.¹⁵

¹⁴ The emblem did not always appear in red. For use in black-and-white television, it was specified that the sun would appear in gray, while the five Olympic rings and type would appear in black. Maemura, p. 134.

¹⁵ Kamekura, 1973, p. 15.

FIG 3



Note: Tokyo 1964 Second Poster, designed by Kamekura Yusaku, © IOC

But besides his interest in capturing modernity and being in line with the high technological achievements of Japan in his era, Kamekura was also passionate about the values inherent in Japan's graphic tradition. Since his speech titled "Katachi" in the 1960 World Design Conference (Sekai Design Kaigi) held in Tokyo, Kamekura had attracted the attention of international design circles with his ideas on *katachi* (form, shape, pattern). In his speech Kamekura talked about his and his colleagues work of producing a systematic analysis of Japanese *katachi* (forms).

Our object was to approach an understanding of visual Japan by identifying the characteristics of the forms of its culture, and to make these known. ... We did not start this project because our interest was stirred only by forms and patterns. Our object was to capture what lies behind these forms and what is characteristic of the human spirit that created them. ... If, from these forms we have gathered here, we are able to capture the bent of our Japanese spirit, it will be reborn within the modern Japanese; it will be incorporated into forms of everyday living; and, crystallized in works of art.¹⁶

¹⁶ Yuichiro Kojiro, *Forms in Japan*, 1965, http://www.archive.org/stream/formsinjapan036956mbp/formsinjapan036956mbp_djvu.txt.

Kamekura was especially interested in the design of the *mon* (crest), the Japanese heraldic symbol that was used as the military emblem of clans in the Medieval period and became a symbols of place and position during the Edo period (1600—1868). *Mon* design usually consisted of a roundel that encircled the stylized figure of a natural form (such as a flower that was symbolic of a family, clan, or person) or other symbols (such as kanji characters). *Mon* designs were applied on clothes, flags, tents and other military equipment as a means of identification. Kamekura saw the crest as “a product of triangle and divider;”¹⁷ in other words, he discerned in it a quality strongly in line with the principles and production methods of modern design. For Kamekura, postwar Japan needed to re-evaluate *mon* design:

There is a need for Japan’s commercial artists to take a fresh look at the beauty of Japanese crests, at least in connection with their efforts to design trademarks with a Japanese flavor. This may well be the road to the creation of new and distinguished symbols, this time for Japanese industry.¹⁸

Katsumi and Kamekura had both remarked that the development of the crest design was a product of collaborative work rather than of single designers (echoing Katsumi’s emphasis on teamwork in his organization of the 1964 design), and also noted their use of easily identifiable patterns, such as coins for merchants or ears of rice for farmers, that made them intelligible by wider publics.¹⁹ Katsumi considered family crests as among “the most perfect visual language systems in the world,” due to their simplicity and consistency²⁰—and saw the pictograms as their successor. Kamekura had worked with the idea of crest design for several of his design projects, including ones for non-Japanese corporations.²¹ Arguably the most significant principle that Kamekura derived from his studies of Japan’s crest design is the “central image” composition that Herbert Bayer pointed out in his foreword to one of Kamekura’s monographs:

He [Kamekura] rarely reverts to a design composition in the manner of “dynamic symmetry” or of other non-symmetrical arrangements. He knows the visual efficiency of *one* central image: it concentrates and draws upon itself the attention and interest of the passer-by, even from a distance. Type is usually of secondary importance but it is always placed focally, with clarity, in support of the image.²²

Principles of *katachi* (form) and *mon* (crest) design were thus utilized in the robust symmetrical composition of the Tokyo 1964 emblem. But what exactly was the meaning of the red circle that was a part of the Olympic emblem? For some, this was the icon of, literally, the sun; for

¹⁷ Masaru Katsumi, ‘Essay.’ In Kamekura, Yusaku, *The Graphic Design of Yusaku Kamekura*. New York: Weatherhill, 1973, p. 15.

¹⁸ Yusaku Kamekura, *Trademarks of the World*, Tokyo: David Publishing; New York: George Wittenborn, 1956, p. 15.

¹⁹ Katsumi, 1973, p. 167.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

²¹ It is interesting to note that for the design Kamekura made for Shell he created a symbol very similar to that of the chrysanthemum, Japan’s Imperial crest. Kamekura has said about the Imperial crest: ‘Composed of 16 pedals in a simplified form the chrysanthemum crest is well balanced as a design and has a refined beauty, quite apart from its historical and emotional associations. It continued to make a lasting impression upon people, at least until the end of the last war, partly because of the rarity with which it was used even by the Imperial Family.’ Kamekura, 1956, p. 14.

²² Herbert Bayer, ‘Forward.’ In Kamekura, 1973, p. 8.

others this was a direct reference to Japan's flag, the *hi-no-maru*. According to architectural critic Kawazoe Noboru, "the poster is a fitting mark for an occasion involving sports in which it is the healthy body that counts more than the scheming mind. Its essential design, while symbolizing Japan, goes far beyond all national boundaries to have wide international appeal."²³ Contrary to Kawazoe, Kamekura avoided making direct references to the flag, and his explanations of the design of the emblem was mostly based on aspects of composition. In a discussion between various designers published in the design magazine *Kôkoku Bijutsu* in 1962, Kamekura claimed that the interpretation of the red circle would derive from the different viewers' perspectives rather than from his own intentions as the designer. In this discussion, Kamekura stated that most people outside Japan do not perceive the red circle as the Japanese flag, because of the emblem's vertical composition and the fact that the proportions between the red circle and the white space around it are different from those of a flag: "For [the non-Japanese], [the emblem] looks more like the sun. The inspiration came from the flag but it is representing the sun. However, when Japanese see it—it must be their patriotism—it reminds them of their flag."²⁴

Elsewhere, Kamekura also admitted that he was inspired by the Japanese flag—even though, as he stated, his interest was captured by the red color of the rising sun rather than by the national significance of the symbol. The red of the sun embodied for Kamekura the people's excitement for the athletic competition, and its shape carried formal affinities with the five rings of the Olympic logo.²⁵ The red color and the shape of the flag were convenient elements for Kamekura to work with. By using them, he did not need to compromise his modernist ethos; indeed, the chromatic composition, the typeface and the geometry of the poster were very much in accordance to the prescriptions of modern graphic design. Notwithstanding Kamekura's modernist concerns, the Olympic organizers expressed their satisfaction for this "renewed appreciation of the Rising Sun's dynamic simplicity,"²⁶ a re-appreciation that also applied to other controversial features associated with Japan's role in the wartime era, such as the national anthem and the choice of the imperial flower, the chrysanthemum, as the official flower of the Games.²⁷

But overlooking the connotations of the Japanese flag in favor of formal modernist aspirations would be only a partial way of examining the function of the emblem. The reminiscence of Japan's flag has significant political implications. Despite the fact that the 1964 Olympics were considered symbolic of Japan's postwar era of peace and demilitarization, many of the Olympic choices implied the opposite, establishing continuity with previous eras. Olympic studies scholars have explored analogies between prewar and postwar discourses, and the relationship between the canceled 1940 Tokyo Games and those of 1964. Otomo Rio has suggested that the Tokyo Olympics continued a discourse from the 1930s without much

²³ Cited in Kamekura, 1973, p. 173.

²⁴ Maemura, 'Hinomaru to Modan', pp. 138-139. Cited from 'Zadan kai Olympiku Tokyo Taikai wo ato Ninen ni hikaete' (Roundtable Discussion Two Years Before the Tokyo Olympics), *Kôkoku Bijutsu*, 36 and 37, Orikomî Kôkoku sha, Nov. 1962, p. 22.

²⁵ Maemura, 'Hinomaru to Modan', p. 140. Cited from Kamekura, Yusaku, *Kyokusen to chokusen uchu* (Universe of Curves and Lines), Tokyo: Kodansha, 1983.

²⁶ Organizing Committee for the Games of the XVIII Olympiad. *The Games of the XVIII Olympiad: Tokyo 1964: The Official Report of the Organizing Committee*. Vol. 1, 1964, p. 353.

²⁷ This was the first, and as far as I know, only time that an Olympic flower was chosen.

departure from that militaristic scope. As Olympic studies historian Christian Tagsold, in studying the opening ceremony of 1964 has concluded, the classical symbols of Japanese nationalism, such as *hi-no-maru*, the flag, and national anthem, even though tainted by the Second World War, were revived and reinstalled through the 1964 Olympic Games and particularly the opening ceremony, becoming acceptable both nationally and internationally.²⁸ Perhaps it was in the ceremonies of the 1964 Olympics that the new popular sovereignty and the status of the emperor were most clearly displayed to the rest of the world,” as John Hall has commented on the emperor’s opening of the ceremony at a time that his status as the head of the state was in no way disputable.²⁹ Along the same lines, the imperial flower, the chrysanthemum, was chosen to be the official flower of the 1964 Olympics, as mentioned above. Indeed, according to Sandra Collins, “even though these international sporting events were dedicated to peace, the Japanese militaristic past and present could not be escaped.” The Japanese Self-Defence force marked its presence, as its members carried the Olympic flag into the stadium and its jet planes formed the Olympic Circles in the sky, while the emperor left the royal box.³⁰

The contribution of design in naturalizing these processes is irrefutable. But this should not come as a surprise. Olympic designers Kamekura and Hara, influenced by modern design and especially Russian constructivism, had active roles in nationalist representations of wartime Japan. Hara was the art director for the controversial propaganda magazines *Nippon* and *Front*, in which Kamekura worked in leading positions. These magazines, sponsored by private capital but contributing to the nationalist goals of prewar Japan, used ultra-modern languages and techniques such as photomontage, propagating Japan’s military and colonial power abroad. Also, Hara had designed a poster for advertising the Tokyo 1940 Games abroad, carrying an abstract symbol of Mt. Fuji³¹

The trajectory of Kamekura and Hara during the two eras raises crucial questions about the ideological role of design and the limitations of formalist interpretations of design: Is it possible to have revolutionary languages with reactionary meanings? Are designers devoid of political responsibility? But beyond the intentionality of the designers, what becomes much more crucial for understanding the function of these projects is the overall context within which they operate. What type of meanings are embedded within the visual culture of the Olympics at the moment that it is being endorsed as national culture? Even if the political ideals of 1960s Japan had changed, the images of athletes in motion resonated with the past ideas of individual endurance in service to the collective good. But, as Otomo has suggested, “as state power ... became inconspicuous in the postwar period, it became harder to imagine sources of

²⁸ Christian Tagsold, ‘The Tōkyō Olympics as a Token of Renationalization.’ In Andreas Niehaus and Max Seinsch (eds.), *Olympic Japan - Ideals and Realities of (Inter)Nationalism*, Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2007, pp. 111-129; Hirabayashi Taiko, ‘Kokka ishiki to ningen.’ (The Awareness of the State and the People). In Noma Shōichi (ed.), *Bungakusha no mita seiki no saiten* (The Festival of the Century as the Literati Saw it), Tōkyō: Kōdansha, 1964, p. 262, cited in Tagsold, p. 120.

²⁹ Hall, John W.: ‘A Monarch for Modern Japan.’ In: Ward, Robert E. (ed.), *Political Development in Modern Japan*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1968, p. 62, cited in Tagsold.

³⁰ Sandra Collins, ‘Samurai’ Politics: Japanese Cultural Identity in Global Sport — The Olympic Games as a Representational Strategy,’ *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 24, No. 3, March 2007, 357-374, p. 365.

³¹ Kawahata Naomichi, *Hara Hiromu to “Bokutachi no Shin Kappanjutsu”* (Hara Hiromu and “Our New Printing Techniques”), Tokyo: Transart, 2002, pp. 196-7.

oppression.”³² It seems, then, that the culture that was configured by the postwar Olympics, which became fused with the advertising of high-tech products and consumer goods, entailed the capacity to obscure ideology, shifting the public attention to material results.

Design for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games

Forty-four years later, China became the third Asian nation to host the Olympic Games, a choice that was presented as “natural,” given the universalizing agenda of the International Olympic Committee. How are relations between the local and the international encoded in the Beijing Olympic designs? The design of the 2008 Beijing Olympics emblem was selected after an international competition in which 89 percent of the entries came from Greater China. An international committee chose the design of Chinese company AICI, which was further refined by a design team that worked in collaboration with the Olympic committee. The winning entry is an image of an ancient Chinese seal that carries an inscription with a double meaning: on the iconic level it represents the figure of an athlete, while on the textual level it represents the Chinese character “jing,” meaning city, the second character of the word “Beijing” (Figure 4). The figure is also reminiscent of the Chinese character “wen,” meaning culture, even though this was not the intention of the designers.³³

As explained by Zhang Wu, AICI’s CEO, this figure is comprised of a person with a serpentine body, a style used in ancient China to represent a hero. During the refinement process, the figure was given even more sense of movement to resemble a “dancing” man. Another critical aspect of the emblem was the decision to use calligraphy as specific to Chinese culture, and especially the Zhuan style, which evolved during the Qin-Han dynasties (221 BC — 220 AD), a period known for the unification of China and its language.³⁴ During the refinement stage, committee members were wary about the dual text-pictorial appearance of the ‘京’ character and thought it was incomplete as a word. Numerous professional Zhuan-seal carvers researched the Jiaguwen (oracle-bone) Chinese characters and concluded that the ‘京’ could not qualify as a character but rather as a pictogram, used in a type of seal of the pre-Qin era that has animals carved onto it, called the Xiaoxing.³⁵

For the logotype of the “Beijing 2008” text, the committee considered various options ranging from computer set-types and brush-strokes written in cursive to over three hundred children’s handwriting, all of which were found to be incompatible with the visual parts of the logo. In the end, the designers at AICI suggested using Han clerical script, which was approved by the Beijing Olympic committee as “sufficiently conveying the greatness of Chinese culture.”³⁶

The design of the torch was also the outcome of an international competition³⁷ followed by a rigorous process of refinement through teamwork. The competition was won by the

³² Otomo Rio, Narratives, the Body and the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, *Asian Studies Review*, 31, June 2007 (pp. 117-132), p. 118.

³³ <http://www.aici.cn/hhsj.html>, Behind the scenes of the Olympic logo design.

³⁴ <http://www.aici.cn/hhwd.html>, Reading closely into ‘China seal, dancing Beijing’

³⁵ <http://www.aici.cn/hhsj.html>

³⁶ <http://www.aici.cn/hhcs.html>

³⁷ <http://ad.tsinghua.edu.cn/qhmy/viewcontent.jsp?contentID=48&columnID=66&pid=7>

FIG 4



Note: Beijing 2008 Emblem, designed by AICI, © IOC

multinational computer company Lenovo, with bases in China, Japan and the U.S. The torch design evokes the shape of a traditional Chinese painting scroll, emphasizing the invention of paper by the Chinese in the first century AD, and focusing on the treatment of the torches surface (Figure 5). Its main two characteristics are the use of colors--deep red and bright silver--and its embossed pattern of auspicious clouds. This pattern, named "leiwen," or in its later mutation "xiangyun,"³⁸ derives from the Chinese Bronze Age. *Leiwen* are stylized clouds rendered in the Chinese curlicue style, known as symbols of spirituality.

The use of Chinese historical motifs as a register of both cultural identity and past national glory is a recurring theme in post-Mao China. The use of history as a resource for iconography differentiates the Beijing design from that of the Tokyo Games, which sought a syntactic rather than iconic relation with history, through its elaboration of principles that characterized the design of crests. Opening Pandora's history box in contemporary China has revealed a rich palette of iconic references that are not only unique to China, but also reminders of Chinese culture's past supremacy in Asia. The nationalist climate of contemporary China is the backbone of such an approach. As Ko Sunbing has stated, nationalism has become a means to strengthen the Communist Party's legitimacy and to provide people with a sense of purpose and

³⁸ http://sc.68design.net/gd/yun/page_01.htm

FIG 5



Note: Beijing 2008 Torch, designed by Lenovo, © IOC/Jürg Döntasch

meaning.³⁹ At the same time, the emphasis on China's early unification era is paramount, given the constant needs for unification of China as a multi-ethnic, multilingual and multicultural nation with recurring separatist movements.

Ancient Chinese iconography, rearticulated through the principles of contemporary design, also became an ideal vehicle for expressing the contemporary state-corporate culture of China, lending to it the strength of its past hegemonic role in the Eastern hemisphere. This referential framework also fully responds to the demands of the global audience that strives for the consumption of the "other" through registers of difference that often rely on stereotypical iconographies.

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It is a paradox that this emphasis on China's historical background was paralleled by major processes of destruction of the physical and psychogeographical domain of everyday life. If in the case of Japan a deeper study of the Olympic design indicates a silent continuity with the country's prewar nationalistic past despite its pronouncement of change and renewal, the emphasis on China's history as enunciated by its graphic design does not herald continuity, but rather one more era of change. Even if this change aims to reclaim a distant historical epoch, it does not cease to bring with it a rupture with the most recent past, as evident by the destruction of *hutong* (traditional residential quarters formed along narrow alleys) and traditional patterns of life. As in the bid material, analyzed by Heidi Haugen, Chinese ancient history is presented as

³⁹ Sunbing Ko, 'China's pragmatism as a grand national development strategy: Historical legacy and evolution,' *Issues and Studies*, 37 (6), 2001 (1-28).

“a legendary period which shows the potential of greatness in the present Chinese nation.” The distant past is perceived “as holding a promise of greatness” and “the recent past as being a time of hardship. ... The promise of the distant past is evoked in calls for a break with the underdevelopment of the recent past.”⁴⁰ Thus, ironically, in order for the ancient glory to be reclaimed, a historical rupture has to be performed.

To recapitulate, contrary to Japanese designers who tried to articulate a modern, iconoclastic visual language that de-traditionalized Japanese visual culture, Chinese Olympic enterprises in post-revolutionary China did not hesitate to carry iconic references to ancient Chinese culture, utilizing motifs that, in addition to their currency as commodities that denote ethnic difference in a global marketplace, declared in a metonymic manner China's reemergence as a major world power. As much as they visually registered the new constructive ideals of their reborn nations (Japan and China, respectively), these newly articulated graphic languages also obscured processes that may be considered destructive or reactionary; their ideological role being precisely to neutralize these contradictions.

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⁴⁰ Heidi Haugen, 'The construction of Beijing as an Olympic City,' pp. 70-73, thesis, http://www.sum.uio.no/publications/pdf_fulltekst/dt2003.05.haugen.pdf

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