

China in 2008

A Year of Great Significance

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is associated with the fad of studying abroad and fake diplomas. In particular, the term "Carleton University," from which Qian's character Fang Hongjian purchased his fake PhD diploma, can refer to an illegitimate degree qualification or academic institution. Qian scorned the fake diploma as "Adam and Eve's fig leaf," which "could hide a person's shame and wrap up his disgrace." Since China's opening and reform, more and more Chinese have been choosing to study overseas so as to return years later with a "gilded" (*dujin*) layer. Correspondingly, many people soon realize that some of these returned students, like Fang Hongjian, have fake diplomas. As a result, we can see that public discourse on various media began to warn employers of those who were graduates of "Carleton University." However, it should be noted that Qian's satire was not merely limited to those fake degree holders. In his novel, even those characters with real PhD degrees were nothing but pretentious and arrogant intellectuals. In fact, in Spence's view, what Qian was aiming to satirize is the whole "baleful effects of the excessive adaptation of Western literary and aesthetic theories," which had "corroded the integrity of the Chinese." In other words, Qian expressed his doubts that China had to throw off the shackles of tradition and urgently modernize itself in order to be a strong, self-confident nation. He mocked the entire phenomenon of overseas studying as "modern *keju*" (Imperial Examination System), the alternative of "reflecting glory on one's ancestors" (*guang zong yao zu*). The following words from *Wei Cheng* have been widely regarded in China as the most classic satire of the mentality of those who blindly followed the fever of studying abroad:

The studying abroad today is like passing examinations under the old Manchu system. . . . It's not for the broadening of knowledge that one goes abroad but to get rid of that inferiority complex. It's like having smallpox or measles, or in other words, it's essential to have them. . . . Once we've studied abroad, we've gotten the inferiority complex out of the system, and our souls become strengthened, and when we do come across such germs as Ph.D.'s or M.A.'s we've built up a resistance against them. . . . Since all other subjects . . . have already been Westernized, Chinese literature, the only native product, is still in need of a foreign trademark before it can hold its own.

It should be noted that Qian himself received a bachelor's degree in English literature from Oxford University in 1937. His thesis was "China in the English Literature of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century."

Last but not least, if you happened to be familiar with the more "vulgar" side of contemporary Chinese popular culture, unexpectedly, you will be amused to find that many *laobaixing* (commoners) like to use "Wei Cheng" to refer to playing mahjong. It is unclear why and when "Wei Cheng" became a mahjong nickname. Probably it is because playing mahjong is like building up "surrounded walls." It is interesting to notice that Qian mentioned mahjong in his novel. When he described bored Chinese students playing mahjong on the ship

home from their overseas studies, Qian referred to it as "the Chinese national pastime," which was "said to be popular in America as well," and sarcastically remarked, "thus playing mahjong not only had a down-home flavor to it but was also in tune with world trends."

As early as the 1920s, if not earlier, mahjong was well known in China for its corrupting influence. In particular, it was often associated with the stereotypical image of the "parasitic and decadent" *taitais* (wives of upper- or middle-class men), as depicted in the beginning of Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution* or in the descriptions of novelist Eileen Chang (Zhang Ailing), whose works invoke popular nostalgia for 1930–1940s Shanghai. By using mahjong here, Qian expressed scorn that China's "bright future" was in the hands of these returning students, representatives of modern "civilization and progress," spending "their entire time gambling, except for eating and sleeping."

All of the above four aspects demonstrate the degrees to which *Wei Cheng* has permeated contemporary Chinese popular culture. In a sense, it could be argued that *Wei Cheng*'s "metamorphosis" from a novel to a phrase or idiom in Chinese daily lexicon provided a new arena for the expression and elaboration of social phenomenon and mentality in family life, work, and education.

Wei Cheng's later popularization was something that Qian could never have expected considering the various criticisms the book received after its initial publication in 1947. In spite of the accuracy of the novel's biting social commentary, it was derided by critics as "high-class reading," "out of this universe," and unconnected with ordinary people's devastating wartime living experiences and for being apolitical, "not embodying either leftist or anti-Japanese values." The majority of the population barely heard of it because of its limited circulation.

Half a century later, exhausted from various political struggles and movements, the Chinese masses have changed their tastes and reading expectations. Caught by its tone of futility, they began to enjoy its apolitical stance, honesty and humor, psychological insights, and the erudite display in its skillful manipulation of language. After its adaptation to a well-received TV show, mass media further led common people to find the rich relevance of this novel to their own lives in 1990s China, a society with a reflective orientation amid its everyday newness. Lacking even one lovable character or role model (including its four heroines), readers nonetheless believe that Qian gave them a sympathetic portrayal of real persons in whom they found a little bit of themselves.

Faking Heaven: It's All Done with Mirrors: Patty Chang's *Shangri-la* and the Utopian Will to Order in China ☆ Timothy S. Oakes

How exquisitely human was the wish for permanent happiness, and how thin the human imagination became trying to achieve it. . . .

How can they hold it together, he wondered, this hard-won heaven defined only by the absence of the unsaved, the unworthy, and the strange?

—Toni Morrison, *Paradise*

Now that the 2008 Olympics have come and gone, Beijing can perhaps breathe a sigh of relief that after two weeks of intensive scrutiny, the most embarrassing thing the foreign media could come up with during the Games was that some of the events in the spectacular opening ceremony were faked.⁵ First, we learned that nine-year old Lin Miaoke was not in fact singing a revised *Song of the Motherland* at all but was lip-synching the voice of the less photogenic Yang Peiyi. Then we learned that some of the firework footprints leading up to the National Stadium were Photoshopped ahead of time and never actually occurred. And finally, we learned that the children dressed in nationality costumes were not minority children at all but Han Chinese. A few newscasters and pundits did their best to muster some shock (shock!) that the world had been hoodwinked into believing China could really pull off the perfection we saw on our television screens.⁶

We tend to smell in fakery like this the whiff of scandal. The fake carries with it the stain of deception, of shame, even immorality. And yet, it turns out that fakery is an important part of our ability to imagine perfection. This is not because perfection is the opposite of fakery but because perfection *depends* upon the fake. Only the real world is imperfect, blemished, and full of chaos and unpredictability. The fake world of televised opening ceremonies, by contrast, is dependable, predictable, and *orderly*. And while we may live in the messiness of the real world, we *yearn to believe* in the more ordered and dependable replica we see on television.

Of course, it also turned out that during the 2000 Olympics, Sydney faked their opening ceremony too. The *Sydney Morning Herald* revealed only shortly after the closing of the Beijing Olympics that the Sydney Symphony had mimed its entire performance eight years ago. In fact, some of it wasn't even the Sydney Symphony playing on the backing tape but their archival, the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. Such orchestral maneuvers, it seems, are routine for important events where nothing can be left to chance. And so, China apparently has no monopoly on faking it. Nevertheless, the situation in Beijing gave Ai Weiwei occasion to lament in his August 18, 2008, column in *The Guardian* about how

5. Some *China Beat* readers pointed out that not permitting any protests to occur in the official "protest zones" during the Olympic games was perhaps a more embarrassing revelation than the faked opening ceremonies. However, it is arguable that the Beijing government itself found the former any more embarrassing than the latter.

6. The faked ceremonies were the subject of many reports in the Western media during the Games; see also Geremie Barmé's *China Beat* post "Painting over Mao," an excerpt from which is reprinted in the volume.

China may be able to fake its way to a perfect Olympics—to the "fake applause" of the media and the public—but "true happiness" can never be faked: "This nation is notorious for its ability to make or fake anything cheaply," he wrote. "'Made-in-China' goods now fill homes around the world. But our giant country has a small problem. We can't manufacture the happiness of our people." He added, "Real public contentment can't be pirated or copied."

Maybe so. But accusing China of faking itself into modernity is as old as, well, modernity itself. In the book *River Town*, Peter Hessler recounts a scandalized seventeenth-century Spanish priest named Domingo Navarrete, who described business methods in China thus: "The Chinese are very ingenious at imitation. They have imitated to perfection whatsoever they have seen brought out of Europe. In the Province of Canton they have counterfeited several things so exactly, that they sell them Inland for Goods brought out from Europe." While there's nothing novel in remarking on the ubiquity of China's knockoff economy, it may be worth reflecting on just what is so important about shoring up the boundary between the real and the fake, especially when using the yardstick of modernity to measure China's emergence as a world power.

To the extent that modernity can be conceived as a telos of progress toward an ever more perfect, rational, or ideal world, faking it is probably the best anyone can do. The reason for this, I think, lies within the idea of modernity itself. In *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, Marshall Berman claimed that "to be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are." Modernity is paradoxical; it is both liberating and chaotic, creative and destructive. This has resulted in a host of projects throughout recent history—mostly directed by governments—to harness and control what Berman called the "juggernaut" of modernity, to point it toward an end point of some kind and protect us from its destructive side. This is the kind of rational or progressive modernity that states engage in, as James Scott has argued in *Seeing Like a State*. But it is folly to think that the juggernaut can really be controlled, that perfect order or rationality is achievable. And that is why this kind of modernity, the modernity that seeks only progress and liberation without any of the chaos, must be faked. The "paradise" of order and harmony that this view of modernity promises, like all utopias, cannot but be realized without dissolving the boundaries between the real and the fake, the sacred and profane, the original and the virtual.

So perhaps Ai Weiwei has it wrong. What if "true happiness" must *always* be complicit with fakery? What if something so lofty and pure as true happiness can never be realized except in some form of approximation or replication, where all the inevitable blemishes, mistakes, and unexpected turns of events can be controlled, deleted, and Photoshopped out? Judging from the comments posted on *The Guardian's* website, many of Ai's readers bristled at the implication that true happiness could be found only in a "free and democratic" country

like England. And that shouldn't be surprising. While the English are perhaps more enthusiastic than others at disowning happiness, the point is that true happiness is often something that is thought to be found far away, in other places or in other times. And should we actually ever experience true happiness here and now, it is likely to dissipate before we've had time to realize what hit us. From this way of looking at things, Ai Weiwei is simply following in the footsteps of generations of utopian thinkers who have imagined a paradise of perfect happiness lying just beyond the horizon, just out of reach, and just about anywhere but *here and now*.

So, for those of us who must live here in the present, where does that leave things? Toni Morrison's answer suggests that it leaves us only with a poorly imagined replica. Photoshopped fireworks and lip-synched songs. And that pretty accurately sums up the past few centuries of utopian thinking. Humanity has been collectively imagining a better world since the Fall of Eden, I suppose, and all we have to show for our efforts is Disneyland.

If, as Michael Sorkin has argued in *Variations on a Theme Park*, Disneyland marks the culmination of a century of utopian thinking as the "superannuated Shangri-la of the 1950s," then it fits well Morrison's belief that we're not up to the task of imagining paradise. Disneyland simply reflects a cleaner, more ordered (and fake!) version of our world back to us, from Main Street USA to Frontierland and Tomorrowland. At Disneyland we see the thinness of our imagination betrayed by the *order* we impose on paradise. Disneyland reveals a thin vision of perfection, of "true happiness" (call it what you will), that depends on the orderly blending of the real and the fake. As such, it provides the model for "faking it" that China is now seemingly taking to a new level. Like the Sydney Olympics, Disneyland, then, compels us to admit that there is nothing particularly *Chinese* about faking it.

But China's current enthusiasm for fakery is nevertheless disarming. In today's postreform consumer economy of leisure culture, there is little that *isn't* faked. It's almost too banal to mention how true this is of basic consumer goods from DVDs and liquor to iPhones and Rolexes. But that's just the beginning. China's cultural landscape is now littered with fake Eiffel Towers, fake Capitol buildings and White Houses, and fake English villages. There are towns, like Zhouzhuang, that are even fakes of themselves. And this is something that continues to scandalize the Western media. In an exposé titled "Faking It" and published several years ago in *The Observer*, Jasper Becker wrote of the "national scandal" of Zhouzhuang faking itself as an old town. In fact, Becker wrote, most of the town had been recently bulldozed, rebuilt, and repainted to *look* old. Not only were tourists being fooled into thinking they were visiting a real antique water town on the Yangzi Delta, but so too was UNESCO, whose World Heritage Committee awarded Zhouzhuang a tentative World Heritage listing in 1998.⁷ For

7. For an example of tourists being "hoodwinked" by Zhouzhuang, see the travel blog post at <http://chake.chinatefl.com/cc10f.html> (accessed September 16, 2008). Here the

his part, the mayor of Zhouzhuang defended his preservation-by-bulldozer plan, arguing that his town could not thrive as an antique object "under a glass case."

If, like Becker, we are scandalized by this fakery, we must also admit that the high-stakes competition between localities in China's new economy of cultural capital *demands* the kind of creative blending seen in Zhouzhuang. In a recent review of Zhang Yimou's *Riding Alone for a Thousand Miles*, professors Chen Yao and Yang Guoying pondered the film's role in a debate that boiled over between Yunnan and Guizhou when the authenticity and origins of the *nuo* drama performed in the film came into question. Though the performance unmistakably came from Guizhou (and was even credited thus in the film itself), Zhang Yimou's decision to have it performed in the picturesque Yunnan tourist city of Lijiang emboldened many claims that it actually came from Yunnan. It wasn't long before tourists went looking for *nuo* in Lijiang. Chen and Yang concluded that economic success in today's China depends on localities—like Yunnan—"making an empty show of strength" (*shu zhang sheng shi*) with their cultural resources. That is, places should not be afraid to play with fakery. Indeed, they cannot afford not to.

Making the ultimate case for an "empty show of strength," however, was Lijiang's neighboring county, Zhongdian, whose bid to change its name to Shangri-la was approved by the State Council in 2001. This materialized in place the utopian and Orientalist imaginings of the English writer James Hilton in his 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*. The creation of Shangri-la in China has already been written about extensively.⁸ But the common reaction among many Western observers has been similar to the whiff of scandal with which the faked Olympic ceremony was greeted: we tend to scoff at the commercial crassness of faking something that never really existed. Leave it to China, we might think, to fake (a European vision of) paradise. But this misses the point (*as if* Disneyland never existed!). Like the "scandal" of a fake Olympic ceremony or a fake Zhouzhuang, the fake paradise of Shangri-la is nothing more than an homage to modernity's insatiable appetite for order, efficiency, and rationality, all in the name of achieving that escape from the inevitable chaos that is always there, dogging our repose of harmony and tranquility.

But this is not the first time China has faked paradise. China's utopian archetype, Peach Blossom Spring, has inspired at least seven claims from various towns all believing they are the actual site of Tao Yuanming's classic prose poem. Indeed, Peach Blossom Spring inspired what is arguably China's first theme park,

author claims that "Zhou Zhuang, however, is a TRUE ancient canal town. Development stopped here about 500 years ago. The city has preserved the ancient village intact."

8. See, for example, Ben Hillman, "Paradise under Construction: Minorities, Myths and Modernity in Northwest Yunnan," *Asian Ethnicity* 4, no. 2 (June 2003): 175–88, and Gang Yue, "From Shambhala to Shangri-La: A Traveling Sign in the Era of Global Tourism," in *Cultural Studies in China*, ed. Y. Jin and D. Tao (Singapore: Times Media Academic Publishing, 2004), 165–83.

built in the late Qing dynasty in Hunan. In an otherwise forgettable travelogue of his search for the “real” Peach Blossom Spring—*Don Quixote in China: The Search for Peach Blossom Spring*—travel writer Dean Barrett visited the theme park version of Peach Blossom Spring and found a productive combination of the real and the fake:

Chinese love clever tricks. And what better way to hide the *real* Peach Blossom Spring than by dressing it up and presenting it as a tourist attraction! The brilliance and daring of their plan is equal to anything Zhuge Liang ever thought of! Of course no one has ever found Peach Blossom Spring; precisely because the incredibly clever Chinese . . . have been hiding it *in plain sight* for God-knows-how-long! The residents of the real Peach Blossom Spring have become ticket takers, souvenir hawkers, noodle vendors, chair bearers and tea house waitresses, a Houdini-like sleight-of-hand so audacious it takes my breath away.

Tongue firmly in cheek, Barrett finds paradise hidden within a workaday world of the mundane tasks of building and servicing a tourist site. And this blending of the vulgar and sublime, of the profane and the sacred, lies at the heart of Patty Chang’s production of *Shangri-la*, a work that includes the filming of several installations in Shangri-la itself as well as the display of a four-foot spinning glass “mountain.” In *Shangri-la*, Chang works with the mundane labor that goes into building paradise, but she also plays with the arbitrary divide between the real and the fake, between the original and its replica, and between the sacred and the profane. This is a divide that Shangri-la compels us to question, being a perfect simulacrum itself, a replica of something that doesn’t really exist. Shangri-la is, in other words, *both* fake (a fictional utopia in a novel) and real (a county in Yunnan, a town, a tourist site, a theme park). Patty Chang leaves us with the possibility that the representation, “the fake,” is the only “real” version of paradise that we can hope to achieve.

There are various whimsical installations made and filmed on site in Shangri-la. Chang has a local bakery decorate a cake with a mountain of frosting and a little airplane fuselage crashed upon its slope. The scene of course recalls the airplane crash that brings Hilton’s war refugees to Shangri-la in *Lost Horizon*. We see the cake through several stages of construction and then see it displayed in the bakery’s glass case along with several other cakes. Much of the film focuses on the building of what seems to function as a decompression chamber in the shape of an airplane fuselage (which looks like a life-size version of the cake’s airplane fuselage). Built within a Tibetan courtyard, Chang films Tibetan monks sitting inside the chamber with oxygen masks covering their faces. She also has some locals build a mountain range out of Styrofoam as well as a glass mountain made from plywood and hand-cut mirrors. The latter is then filmed sitting on the back of a battered blue pickup truck, as it is carted around the dusty construction zone that is Shangri-la. All around we see the real mountains surrounding the town, billboard advertisements depicting images of these mountains, and

Chang’s own mirrored mountain, reflecting shattered images of all these things as it humbly traipses through town. As a whole, the installations seem to play with the thinness of our visions of paradise and the mundane materials (frosting, plywood, Styrofoam) with which these visions are made.

But there’s also a clear *will to order* displayed in the film’s scenes. One of the effects of the installations is to appreciate Shangri-la as a sort of encased display. The cake ends up on display behind glass; the monks are viewed in the decompression chamber through the chamber’s small “porthole” windows. The most obvious instance, however, occurs at the film’s beginning, where we see the sandaled feet of Tibetan monks climbing up a rocky mountain trail. As the camera pans back, however, we begin to see that the monks are hiking not up a real mountain but up a fake mountain inside the glass-covered atrium of Shangri-la’s Paradise Hotel. The transparency of glass, along with the encased form of display, suggests an objectifying gaze that orders paradise (in this case, heavily coded as Tibet) into something knowable and, ultimately, subject to touristic commodification.

In this, Chang is referencing a much broader form of what a Foucauldian scholar might term *power/knowledge*: the nineteenth century’s Great Exhibitions of imperial display that prefigured the World Expos and Disney theme parks of the twentieth century. Reaching their apogee perhaps in the Great Exhibition of 1851 with its monumental Crystal Palace, these imperial displays objectified the worlds of colony and empire, making them knowable for Europeans, all the while legitimizing imperialism in the name of science and modernity. There is something of this imperial gaze that Zhouzhuang’s mayor finds in UNESCO’s World Heritage efforts to put towns “under a glass case.” Glass itself plays a special role in this story of *power/knowledge*, for its transparency not only facilitates an objectifying gaze but has tended to also suggest an *improvement* on the original. Cultural objects, for instance, might be better understood once they are isolated, explained, encased, and displayed behind glass in a museum than they would be in their unmediated local context. Similarly, as Timothy Mitchell has pointed out in *Colonizing Egypt*, the exhibitions’ displays of colonial subjects were viewed by audiences as *better than the real thing* in their ability to isolate an imagined cultural essence, excising from the display all the chaos and imperfections of the real colonial world. And for this reason glass has long been associated with utopian thinking and visions of perfection and paradise.

“Utopian schemes have long been closely linked to a rhetoric of transparency, glass, and mirrors, a perpetually shiny vision of the future,” says Russell Ferguson in the curator’s notes to Patty Chang’s exhibition. In 1914, Paul Scheerbart proposed glass as the basis for a new utopian architecture: “The surface of the earth would change greatly if brick architecture were everywhere displaced by glass architecture. . . . And we should then have on the Earth more exquisite things than the gardens of the Arabian Nights. Then we should have a paradise on Earth and would not need to gaze longingly at the paradise in the

sky." And in an extension of this thinking, the fragility of glass also serves to convey the ephemeral quality of utopia. Robert Smithson, for instance, proposed a six-ton mound of broken glass to represent the lost continent of Atlantis in his 1970 installation *Map of Broken Glass (Atlantis)*.

Mirrors and glass also play a role in revealing—and breaking down—the arbitrary distinction between real and fake. The mirrored mountain is one way of expressing the juxtaposition of real and fake that one finds in Shangri-la. Perfection can be found only in a mirror, in a representation, in something that it isn't. And that representation requires careful construction. It requires a lot of work to build a paradise for tourists, where we are willing to suspend disbelief for awhile and enjoy the fake. Chang's mirrored mountain spins around in the exhibit hall throwing off shards of triangular reflections. It gives the walls of the room a shattered, broken feeling. Like Smithson's mound of broken glass representing the mythic lost continent of Atlantis or the Crystal Palace, which itself shattered and burned to the ground soon after it was built, utopias must always be shattered to be known at all. Perfect order can never hold before the real world inevitably intrudes, bringing "the unsaved, the unworthy, and the strange." Patty Chang's spinning mountain is deliberately flashy, gaudy. She calls it "a cross between a prayer wheel and a disco ball," challenging the division between the sacred and the profane, the blessed and the vulgar. Utopian visions have always had both this spiritual longing and crass profiteering—purification and hybridization, as Bruno Latour would call it—lost valleys where people live forever and Disneyland.

And it is this blending of pure and impure that Patty Chang's film leaves us with in a stunning final image: the blue pickup truck now carries not the mirrored mountain as it lopes along the dusty streets of Shangri-la but a single mirror laid across its bed. Reflected in the mirror, we see a deep azure sky and puffy white clouds, while all around is dust, bricks, construction, and people going about their workaday lives. The scene reminds me of a similar image of sky and clouds that illustrates Sorkin's essay on Disneyland in *Variations on a Theme Park*. For Sorkin, that image of the heavens illustrates the only thing that is *not for sale* in Disneyland. And so, perhaps Chang offers a similar message: if you want paradise in Shangri-la, all you have to do is look up. The rest is just a poor imitation.

But I think there's more to Chang's mirrored blue sky than this. The camera, after all, is looking *not* up at the sky but *down* at a mirrored reflection of the sky. And by doing this, we catch glimpses of the messy streets of Shangri-la. It's as if we can't view the sublime except in its reflection. We need the mirror, the representation. We need the fake. Our imagination of paradise depends on it.

Lewis Mumford once wrote that there are two kinds of utopias: one of escape and one of reconstruction. The latter should be easily recognized in the socialist realist art of the Mao era. In the party's current version of this utopia, however, *order* is highly valued over the chaos of the Mao era. In fact, however,

it is difficult to find a vision of utopia that does not imagine a highly ordered society of peace, harmony, and tranquility. This was, after all, Mao's vision too. It seems as true of utopias of escape (e.g., Peach Blossom Spring, Shangri-la) as of utopias of reconstruction (e.g., the Owenite community of New Harmony, Indiana). Orderliness is a virus of utopia that just won't go away.

China's current vision of a modern utopia similarly places a high value on order and harmony. If we are scandalized by the deliberate and repeated transgressions of the boundary between real and fake going on in China today, then we have only forgotten that keeping chaos at bay in the modern project has always been "done with mirrors" and that the utopian yearnings of any society have only ever trafficked in the arts of fakery. Patty Chang's *Shangri-la* reminds us of this with whimsy, subtlety, and, ultimately, grace and beauty.