

China: In the Event Business for 3000 Years

By Doug Matthews

If past experience is any indication, over half the world's population will very soon witness some of the greatest spectacles ever produced for a public audience. I'm talking about the ceremonies and events surrounding the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, China.

One of the world's oldest civilizations, China's recorded history dates back over 3000 years and throughout this period there are continual references to feasts, festivals, and entertainment equal in creativity and magnitude to the special events of today. They are no strangers to the event business and you can bet that what they produce for the Olympics will be talked about for a long time to come. Today's event planners and producers might get some fuel for their creative engines by learning "how it was done in the old days of ancient China."

Let's begin by looking at eating. The idea that a normal event meal lasts a few hours and then everyone goes away "fat, dumb, and happy" is typical of the way we organize dinners today. Not so in the Tang Dynasty (618 to 907 CE or AD), noted for being the zenith of ancient Chinese culture. The emperors of the time spared no expense for state events, including meals, some of which lasted up to five days. One emperor, Zhongzong, gave a feast dubbed a "tail-burner" that consisted of 58 courses and offered such delicacies as sausages of beef intestines filled with mutton fat and marrow, strands of sheep hide a foot in length, octagonal cold food cakes formed in wooden molds, sheep and deer tongues, shredded goose, Snow Baby (water frogs with beans), rabbit, pigeon roasted alive, and a platter of lamb, pork, mutton, bear, and deer (Benn, 2002). Obviously, cholesterol was not a concern.

Like today's event planners, emperors and nobility vied to be the most creative, hiring ingenious craftsmen to build mechanical props and décor for the banquets. One such affair featured a 3 ft tall ale mountain atop a large model tortoise with a hidden, interior reservoir. An ale pool encircled the base of the mountain, and a ring of hills surrounded the pool. Lotuses with blossoms and leaves of wrought iron rose from the pool. Midway up three sides of the mountain were dragons with the front half of their bodies protruding from the slope. The beasts opened their mouths and spit brew into goblets seated on the lotus leaves beneath (Benn, 2002).

And as if duration and decorative props were not enough, most banquets of the nobility throughout China's history incorporated all forms of entertainment. Thanks to Confucius, music was revered as a means to reproduce cosmic order and harmony amongst people (Scarpaci, 2006). Emperors had their own palace orchestras, usually exquisitely-dressed and all female. Dancing accompanied by music was at the core of the lengthy theatrical presentations at feasts, as were illusionists, acrobats, wrestlers, and animal acts. Figure 1, taken from tomb carvings, illustrates musicians, jugglers of knives and balls, dancers, and acrobats performing at a banquet (Lim, 1987). At one birthday celebration for the Emperor Xuanzong in the 8th century, the show's climax was a troop of 100 dancing horses, all adorned with figured embroidery, pearl and jade ornaments attached to their manes and forelocks, and gold and silver halters. "The coursers performed to the "Music of the Upended Goblet," (no doubt a novel mechanical ale dispenser

was also present somewhere!) which had ten parts and was played by a live orchestra. In the course of their act they knelt, reared on their hind legs, clutched goblets in their mouths, and got drunk. The denouement of the steeds' performance was when they ascended a three-tiered platform and whirled around on top of it" (Benn, 2002).



Figure 1: Acrobats, dancers, and musicians at a Han Dynasty banquet

Large public festivals and carnivals were common in ancient China, right from the days of the first emperor, Qin Shi Huang, who in 222 BCE decreed that everyone in the empire should engage in great drinking revelries to celebrate his conquest and unification of China. As with modern carnivals in New Orleans and Rio de Janeiro, a parade of floats drawn by horses or cows was one of the highlights. Some of these were entertainment wagons on which acrobats performed flying stunts at the top of poles fastened to the wagons as in Figure 2 from the Han Dynasty (206 BCE to 220 CE) (Scarpaci, 2006). And you thought Cirque du Soleil was the first to use acrobats on poles!



Figure 2: Acrobats on poles attached to moving carts (Han Dynasty)

However, they paled in comparison to Tang floats, called mountain carts or drought boats. The former were wagons that had superstructures hung with colored silks formed to resemble mountains, some up to four or five stories high. The latter, also draped with colored cloth, were ships made of bamboo and wood. Men inside the boat floats carried them along the avenues. Since they did not float on water, they were called drought boats. Musicians dressed in rich

fabrics and summoned from counties as far as 100 miles from the capital (Chang'an or modern-day Xian), rode on the tops of the boats (Benn, 2002).

Some festivals such as the Lantern Festival which is thought to have originated around the 1st century BCE, survive today. Even so, the grandeur of the past is still hard to match. In 713 CE “Emperor Ruizong had a lantern wheel 200 ft tall erected outside a gate of Chang'an. It was clothed in brocades and silk gauze, and adorned with gold and jade. When he had its 50,000 oil cups lit, the radiance burst forth like the blooms on a flowering tree. More than 1000 female performers wearing gauze trails, embroidered brocades with lustrous pearls, kingfisher hairpins, and fragrant makeup danced and sang under the lantern wheel for three days and nights” (Benn, 2002). Some idea of the type of lanterns can be seen in Figure 3, from a modern version of the festival, although even this work of art is smaller than the one from the Tang Dynasty. No doubt lanterns of immense proportion will probably be visible in Olympics events at some point.



Figure 3: Modern Chinese lantern festival design (Courtesy Ian Whitfield)

Finally, precision and pageantry was the order of the day for most spectacles. Take for example, the entourages that regularly accompanied emperors whenever they ventured from the inner sanctuaries of the Forbidden City. During the Song dynasty (1067 to 1085 CE), Emperor Shenzong's honor guard reportedly numbered 22,000 for state occasions. These included soldiers in full regalia carrying pennants, fans, banners, and weapons, musicians of all types, elephant-drawn chariots, wagons, and palanquins carrying the emperor and high-ranking officials (Thorp, 1988). Figure 4 illustrates a small part of such a procession from the Qing Dynasty (1644 to 1912 CE), complete with elephant-drawn carriage and troops holding banners, pennants, and weapons.



Figure 4: Part of Emperor's Honor Guard from the Qing Dynasty

Indeed, throughout history China could never be accused of producing events on a small scale. Knowing this, today's event planners should be looking forward to the Olympics with baited breath and video recorders at the ready so that not a minute is missed of the incredibly imaginative concepts that will no doubt be on display for the world.

References:

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