

*States of Play*  
by Chris Berry

susan pui san lok's *Faster, Higher* unfurls, loops and repeats across five screens in a montage of archival footage of Chinese mass events, sports, Olympic footage and outtakes, shots of the construction site for the London Olympics in 2012, and preparations for Chinese cultural events in London. The piece is symphonic in quality. Sometimes the material on all the screens is the same, like a chorus. Sometimes they follow one another, *acapella*-style. And sometimes one screen breaks out from the rest, like a solo.

Fast-cut passages of high intensity give way to quiet passages in which energy is gathered again. Overall, two movements dominate. On the ground, athletes run back and forth, mass exercises unfurl, and teams march. But every now and then, there is a movement upwards, a movement that seems to offer release from all the tension and effort on the ground. Doves soar up into the sky at opening ceremonies; mountaineers head up into the white serenity of snow-capped slopes and peaks; and, at the end of the whole piece, red neon lights arranged into Chinese-style lanterns twinkle quietly in the sky.



*Faster, Higher* is a relatively open text. But, for me, it is not the quiet contemplation of the Olympics in their Beijing year that it first seems to be. Rather than a celebration, it seems to me an antidote to all the pomp, ceremony, and display, and all the claims of glory, nobility and human achievement attached to the Olympics and the alleged Olympic Spirit. This is not because *Faster, Higher* rakes the muck on the betrayal of the so-called Olympic Spirit by drug-cheat athletes and freeloaders inside the Olympic Organisation. Still less is it an attack on China as a country unqualified to hold the glorious event because of its pollution/human rights record/oppression of Tibet (delete as appropriate)<sup>1</sup>. I think it goes to more fundamental levels.

*Faster, Higher* alludes to a distinction between sport and play, and how sport functions as a site for the rehearsal and reinforcement of the disciplines, ambitions, and collectivities necessary to modern life. At the centre of this assemblage of modern life stands the nation-state, as a collection of collective identities. The organisation of sports under national flags at the Olympics certainly is heavily emphasised in the piece. In addition to these general reflections, it cannot be ignored that the particular nation-state highlighted throughout the piece is China. Indeed, there is a long history of the use of sport as part of the huge effort to create and sustain national identity and national effort in China. To my eye, *Faster, Higher* is dominated by energetic Chinese imagery, but looking forward towards 2012, what does *Faster, Higher* suggest about modern-day Britain as an Olympic nation-state?

<sup>1</sup>My 'delete as appropriate' comment does mean that I am cynical about the exploitation of such issues by the Western press and other interested parties who benefit from sensationalising such matters. But it does not mean that I don't care about human

rights in China. For a serious anthology on the underlying issues, see Minky Worden, ed., *China's Great Leap: The Beijing Games and Olympian Human Rights Challenges* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2008).

IMAGES OPPOSITE  
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LES JEUX OLYMPIQUES 1924  
(1924) France, 35mm, 61mins  
PRODUCTION COMPANY |  
Rapid-Film  
PRODUCER | DE ROVERA, Jean

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CHINA CELEBRATES (1952)  
People's Republic of China,  
16mm, 40mins, Colour, Chinese  
commentary, English subtitles  
DIRECTOR | WEI-CHIN, Kao  
PRODUCTION COMPANY |  
Peking Film Studios  
MUSIC | CHU, Wei

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THE WORLD ABOUT US: ZAI CI  
DENG SHANG ZHUMULANGMA  
FENG / CHINESE EXPEDITION  
AGAIN ASCENDS WORLD'S  
HIGHEST PEAK [Tx. GB 29.5.77]  
(1975) People's Republic of China  
PRODUCTION COMPANY |  
Central Newsreel and  
Documentary Film Studio

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OLYMPICS '80: OLYMPICS  
80 - CLOSING CEREMONY [Tx  
03/08/80] (1980) Great Britain  
PRODUCTION COMPANY |  
ITV Sport

What is sport? In English, we use phrases like 'a sporting chance' and 'being a good sport' to imply an easy-going and relaxed attitude, as though sport is a garden of respite where the usual rules do not apply. To say someone has a sporting chance means the odds are stacked against them and logically they should fail, but that by some fluke exceeding rational possibility they might just succeed. 'It's all in the luck of the draw' also suggests sport is somehow beyond calculation, a matter of chance. And being a good sport means not caring too much whether you win or lose.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Such an idealistic vision confuses sport with the release and relaxation of play. Sport is what play becomes when it is subjected to the disciplines of modern life. The very title of *Faster, Higher* references the compulsion not just to jump or run but to measure how fast and how high and, furthermore, to measure it against other people. The spontaneous exercise of bodily capabilities in play becomes a catalogue of achievements in sport, and a competition. Organisation, standardisation, discipline, practice, and the pressure to ensure constant improvement are much like the drive to ever-increased productivity in the workplace and the competition for promotions – or to avoid redundancy. In the sports world, someone will always win. And everyone else will always lose. Participation is organised, urged, even made compulsory, in the name of excellence.



The Olympics, therefore, are less a utopia than a heterotopia. A utopia is not only an ideal but also somewhere that does not exist in real life. In contrast, a heterotopia is an other space inside real life, different from it but connected. Foucault writes of heterotopias:

*There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted... The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place... But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there.<sup>2</sup>*

For me, then, *Faster, Higher* works its poetic magic as a kind of heterotopia of a heterotopia. It is a kaleidoscopic reconfiguration of Olympian elements that makes apparent the otherwise invisible dimensions of modern life that are themselves reconfigured in the Olympics. The counting, measuring dimension is there from the very beginning of *Faster, Higher*, where lok has decided to retain the countdown clock and the colour bars prior to the beginning of different archive clips across the five screens.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Les Espaces Autres (1967), Hétérotopies,' presented in 1967 and originally published in *Architecture*,

*Mouvement, Continuité*, no.5 (1984), 46-49. Translated into English by Jay Miskowicz as 'Of Other Spaces (1967), Heterotopias'.

#### IMAGES OPPOSITE



CHINA CELEBRATES (1952)  
People's Republic of China,  
16mm, 40mins, Colour, Chinese  
commentary, English subtitles  
DIRECTOR | WEI-CHIN, Kao  
PRODUCTION COMPANY |  
Peking Film Studios  
MUSIC | CHU, Wei



CHINA TODAY NO. 20 / 124  
(1962) China, 16mm, 10 mins,  
B&W, English commentary  
PRODUCTION COMPANY |  
Central Newsreel and  
Documentary Film Studio

Other formal elements of the work combine with the selected materials to create a sense of compulsion and discipline that is enveloping and also threatens chaos. The clocks run on slightly different sequences, pulling your attention this way and that as the zero hour approaches. Soon a range of images and sounds proliferates in a symphony across the screens. The impossibility of attending to everything at once generates a sense of immersion in an environment of sporting images and sounds that is overwhelming. Even the formal release of the upward movement of the doves, rising up into the sky as symbols of freedom and peace, is undercut. On the soundtrack, we hear gunshots. The flight of the doves cannot be left to chance; they must be frightened into the sky to ensure the dramatic scattering across the skies that the occasion demands.

Apart from the trainers yelling like army sergeants, the other repeated noises on the soundtrack are the low rumble of construction vehicles and the thump of pile-drivers. They hammer home the relentless destruction and construction, the razing of building and levelling of land, and then the laying of foundations and topping out to deadline, that goes into holding an Olympic Games. As the Olympics move from one part of the world to the next, they reflect back the hurricane-like properties of capital as it flows around the planet, fuelling itself in an endless circuit of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation. But unlike a hurricane, the Olympics are not a force of nature. Far removed from spontaneous play, organised sports, like the workings of capital, are huge and human efforts – an awe-inspiring but also exhausting 'triumph of the will', to quote another Olympics film.



But whose will is it that propels this mass effort? *Faster, Higher* follows the countdown clocks and colour bars with the Olympic flag, and then teams of athletes entering stadia behind their national names and national flags, including those of China. This is complemented by other Chinese parades, with the Chinese red flag prominently featured. As a heterotopic vision of the world system, the Olympics remind us that under modernity, the only polities that are recognised are nation-states, and the only way to participate in the world order (and in the Olympics) is under the flag of a nation-state. No one competes as an individual, or as a representative of any other group – only as a citizen-athlete.

The nation-state is not only compulsory for the Olympics; it is a compulsory component of modern life. However, there are very concrete historical reasons why the citizens of countries like China experience a particularly intense anxiety around modernity in general and the nation-state in particular, which all that striving in *Faster, Higher* incarnates for me. In some of Europe and many settler-states like the United States and most of Latin America, the nation-state developed as part of a struggle against monarchy.<sup>3</sup> However, in other parts of the world, including China, modernity arrived over the horizon, all of a sudden, and on a gunboat. It was a completely strange thing, but it had to be understood at once. As Prasenjit Duara has observed, ‘it was only territorial nations with historical self-consciousness which, in the world of competitive capitalist imperialism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, claimed rights in the international system of sovereign states. Such nation-states claimed the freedom, even right, to destroy non-nations such as tribal polities and empires.’<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>The locus classicus for this work is Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

<sup>4</sup>Prasenjit Duara, ‘The Regime of Authenticity: Timelessness, Gender, and National History in Modern China,’ *History and Theory* 37, no.3 (1998): 289.

#### IMAGES OPPOSITE



CHINA TODAY NO. 20 / 124  
(1962) China, 16mm, 10 mins,  
B&W, English commentary  
PRODUCTION COMPANY |  
Central Newsreel and  
Documentary Film Studio



CHINA CELEBRATES (1952)  
People's Republic of China,  
16mm, 40mins, Colour. Chinese  
commentary. English subtitles  
DIRECTOR | WEI-CHIN, Kao  
PRODUCTION COMPANY |  
Peking Film Studios  
MUSIC | CHU, Wei

It was these desperate circumstances that propelled a double-edged drive to transform the Qing Dynasty Empire into a modern Chinese nation-state before it was completely carved up by colonial powers. On the one hand, there was a craving for international recognition. On the other hand, there was huge resentment at being forced to play the international game. Run by the Manchus as an empire, Qing China was a hierarchical structure in which ethnically, religiously, and linguistically diverse peoples swore allegiance to the emperor. He, in his dealings with other powers, handed over parcels of land and people, for example Hong Kong and Taiwan, to the British and Japanese, as spoils of war.

The nation-state, on the other hand, is a collective agency – a national people. It is understood as composed of citizens with equal rights and duties and defined by a shared culture. As a polity, it exercises sovereignty over a territory that is considered inviolable and inalienable. Flags, anthems, history books, national holidays and all manner of other cultural elements including national teams are mobilised to produce the sense of national identity fundamental to creating this national people.



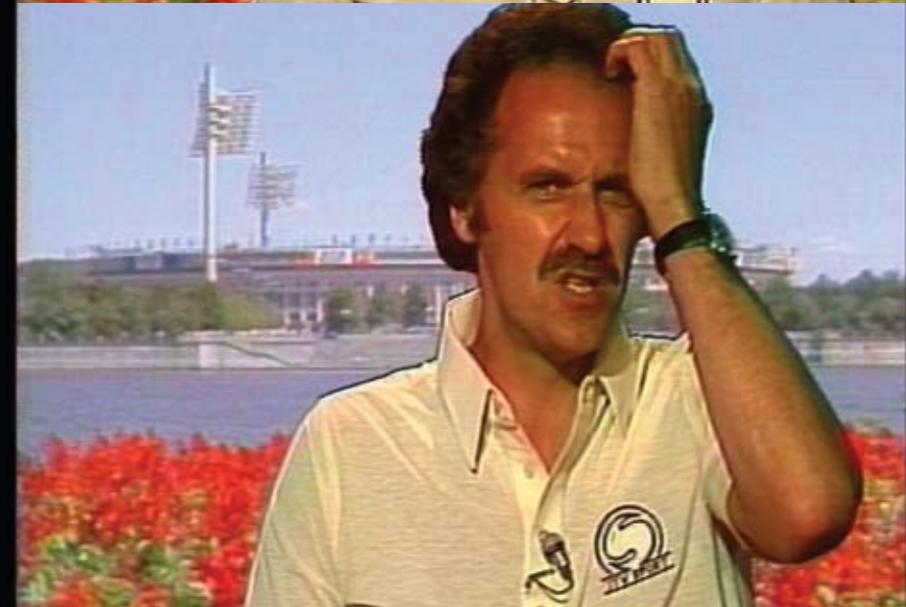
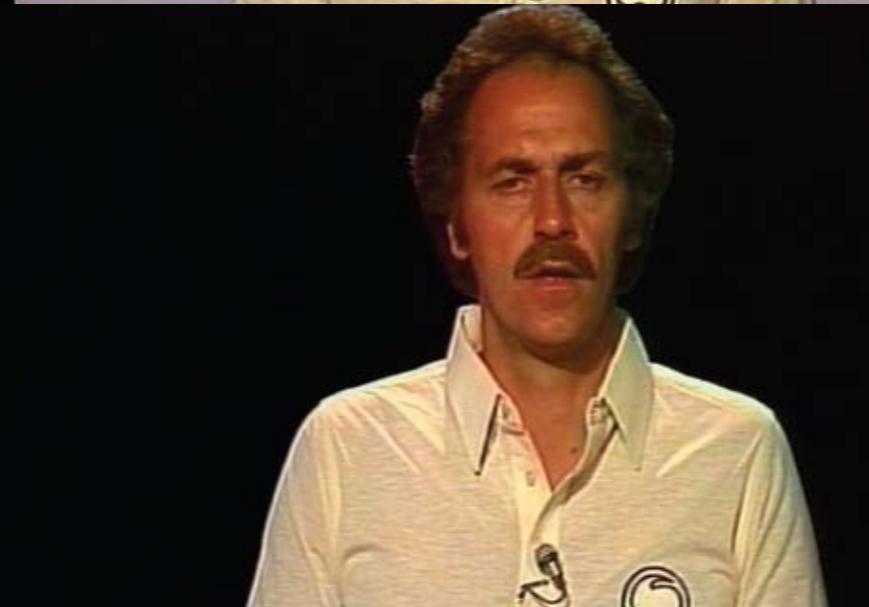
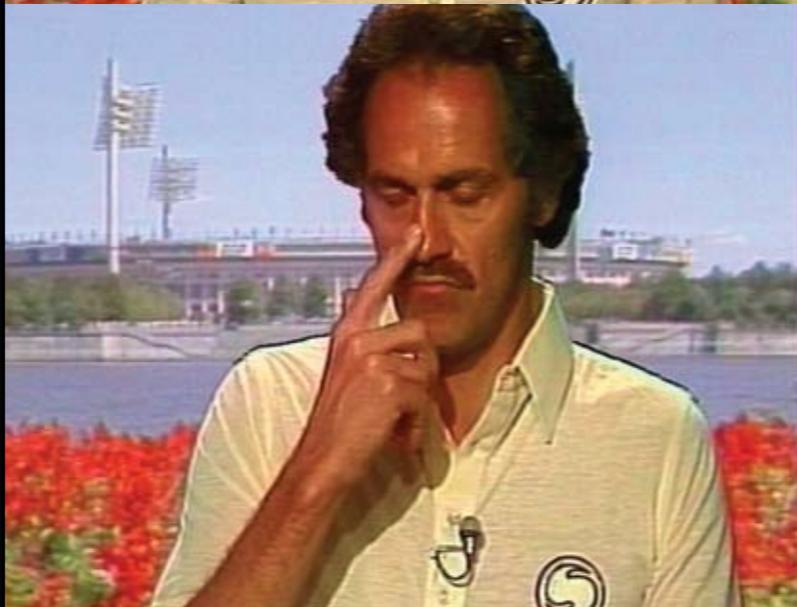
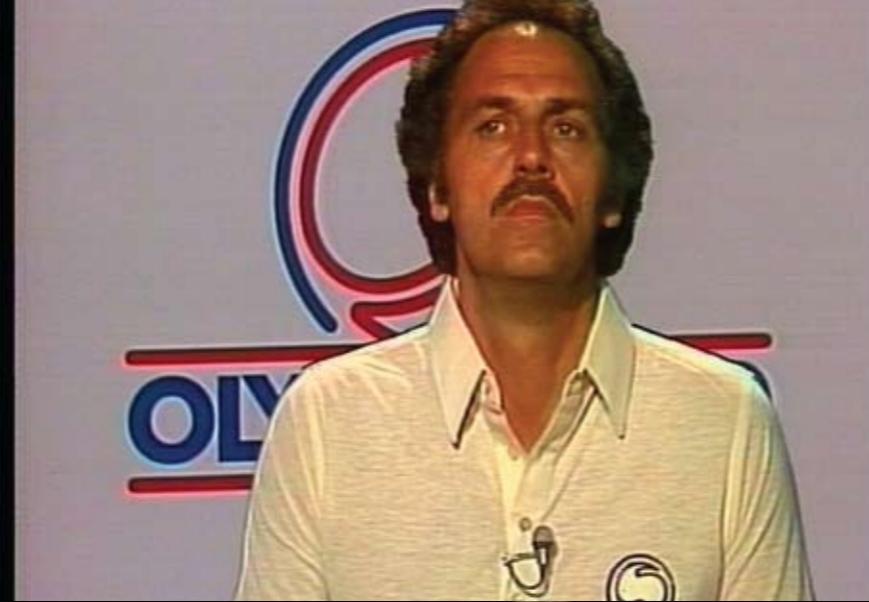
In *Faster, Higher* and in the Olympics, no endeavour, no effort is made for any other reason than the glory of the nation-state. Some scenes in *Faster, Higher* are not explicitly marked by flags and national ambition. For example, there is a very dynamic sequence of people engaged in martial arts exercises – all kicking, running, and leaping. Although there is nothing to say it is a national effort, there is also nothing to mark it as anything else. On the other hand, when those mountaineers are shown struggling up what I assume is a Himalayan peak, the climax is not a final release from the earthly concerns of human society, but the planting of a Chinese flag on the top. That is how we know the mountaineers are Chinese, and that is how we understand why they are climbing. It is not for the sheer joy of it, but for the greater glory of the nation. They have been impelled upwards as surely as those doves at the opening of the Games are sent flying and fleeing into the air.

The use of sport as part of the process of national mobilisation can also be traced back in China's film history. Two landmark films come to mind. In 1934, Lily Li (Li Lili) appeared in *Queen of Sport (Tiyu Huanghou)*. One of China's great silent film stars, Li's image was vigorous and upbeat, making her ideally suited for the role of a young woman who enrolls in a Shanghai sports college. The film contrasts her vigour with the effete degeneration of the bourgeoisie, presenting sport not as the personal pursuit of fitness through bodybuilding but as the individual's contribution to the collective goal of nation-building.

IMAGES OPPOSITE  
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OLYMPICS '80: 1980 OLYMPICS  
HIGHLIGHTS LINKS [Tx 03.08.80]  
(1980) Great Britain  
PRODUCTION COMPANY |  
ITV Sport

For director Sun Yu, this was a consistent theme. Li appeared again in his next film, *Big Road*, also known as *The Highway (Da Lu, 1935)*, along with Shanghai's leading male star, Jin Yan, as a member of a group of young city people who go into the interior. There, they use their muscular bodies to help build a highway to enable the troops to get to the front and fight the Japanese invaders. At the end of the film, they all die heroically in a Japanese air raid.

The contrast between the mobilising power of sport and old-fashioned, conservative attitudes that weaken the nation and hold it back continued after the 1949 revolution, when the Communists established the People's Republic. In 1957, Xie Jin's hit film, *Woman Basketball Player no.5 (Nülan Wuhao)*, also focused on a young woman who enrolls in a sport college. In this case, her fiancé's family objects. They believe work that relies on the mind is superior to physical labour. Encouraged to neglect her studies as an athlete by her fiancé and her family, her team suffers. The entire narrative is a metaphor for the formation and sustenance of the People's Republic itself as a national team in the face of interference from class enemies. Needless to say, by the end of the film, all contradictions are overcome, everyone sacrifices for the cause, and the team flies off in that very modern contraption, an airplane. As they too soar into the sky, they are on a mission to play for China in an international competition.



Most recently, there has been the official film of the Beijing 2008 Olympics, *Dream Weavers* (*Zhumeng* 2008), a ninety-minute documentary directed by Gu Jun and made over a seven-year period.<sup>5</sup> Again, the willing self-sacrifice of this film combines a sense of triumphant belief in a Chinese future that is very different from the ambivalent tone of *Faster, Higher*. From the villagers who have to move out to make way for the building of the Olympic stadia to the child gymnasts enduring pain and shedding tears in dormitories far from home, everyone in *Dream Weavers* sacrifices to realise the national Olympic Dream. For China, sport remains so much more than just a game. It is not only a way to mobilise as a nation-state, but also a way to achieve recognition from other nation-states. No wonder the Chinese government was willing to go to such incredible lengths and expense to put on the most spectacular Games the world has ever seen.

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<sup>5</sup>At the time of writing, this film can be viewed in nine parts on YouTube.

IMAGES OPPOSITE  
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OLYMPICS '80: ATHLETICS  
PREVIEW (INSERTS)  
[Tx. GB 18/07/80] (1980)  
PRODUCTION COMPANY |  
ITV Sport

IMAGES OVERLEAF  
■■■■  
OLYMPICS '80: 1980  
OLYMPICS HIGHLIGHTS  
LINKS [Tx 03.08.80] (1980)  
Great Britain  
PRODUCTION COMPANY |  
ITV Sport

But where these films fully participate in that vision, *Faster, Higher* deconstructs the heroic mode of modernity, with its vision of mobilisation for progress under the national flag. The heterotopic dimensions of *Faster, Higher* also encompass the China-Britain relationship. If, as Foucault writes, 'From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there,' then is *Faster, Higher* also a space in which Britain might ponder its near future in the London Olympics of 2012, through the very recent past of Beijing in 2008? In *Faster, Higher*, in contrast to the pomp, ceremony and enthusiastic flag-waving from the archives, there is a considerably more understated British component. One of the sequences consists of outtakes from British Olympic Games sports coverage, where the commentator getting it wrong is paired with young athletes on the sidelines, fidgeting as they watch their peers or await their turn. In contrast to stadia full of cheering fans, shots of the current blue hoardings block our view of the empty construction site that is to be the home of the 2012 Olympics. Patriotic athletes and roaring fans alternate with crowd barriers going up, and other scenes of preparation, combining with the construction noise that has rumbled on and off the soundtrack from the beginning.



The final shots are of Chinese-style red lanterns in the night sky, echoes of the Olympic flames seen being extinguished a few moments earlier. They are also emphatically Chinese lanterns in Britain, a reminder of the multicultural heritage that comes out of that imperial history – a heritage which, in itself and for very good reasons, blocks any easy mobilisation around nationalism and the flag. Perhaps they herald the Olympic Spirit wafting its way from China, destined to consume Britain as surely as it has Beijing. However, compared with China then, now also caught up in the midst of a global recession, the idea of spending whatever it takes seems impossible. Britain is hardly a country with a secure sense of national identity or economic future. Is the modern dream embodied in the title, *Faster, Higher*, sustainable here, or anywhere? Who shares in the dream now? The Olympics is a machine, like capitalism. As long as it continues to run, it has a logic of its own. *Faster, Higher* captures that intoxicating logic as it makes its way to us from Beijing, towards the question of its own future.



