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Constructing a New Symbolic Form in the Context of Global Neo-Liberalization: A Study of Architectural Spectacles in Twenty-First Century China

As symbolic expressions and material components of the post-Mao socio-economic and political transformation, high-profile transnational architectural projects in twenty-first century China have received significant scholarly attention. Existing research sheds light on the relation between the new Chinese architectural spectacles and China's vigorous incorporation into the world market. It associates recent flagship architectural projects with the ruthless approach of the Chinese State towards economic-political practice in search of success in the increasingly competitive global economy. Laying stress on a market logic and power relations in compliance with a critical Marxian tradition, current scholarship nevertheless lacks a historical and geopolitical view in its analysis of the topic. As a result, the fact that China has been continuing its long struggle for national development under the new conditions of neoliberal globalization is often overlooked. To rectify the situation, this paper focuses on some of China's highest-profile public buildings of state investments that were willingly commissioned to international superstar architects and built between 1998 and 2008. It examines in particular the collaboration between the Chinese state and renowned international architects in producing new global architectural icons and a new image of China. This paper is aware of their nature as spectacles with great symbolic capital seeking competitive edge in the process of global neo-liberalization. However, it emphasizes a historical and geopolitical view that can contextualize the construction of state-sponsored megaprojects in the long history of China's self-strengthening, modernization and integration with the global community. The paper argues for a more comprehensive and affirmative reading of the new architectural spectacles in China.

Surprising the world with the speed and scale of its construction, China's new cityscape has lately been marked by its new iconic buildings of bold architectural statements. This change of landscape was a component of a profound socio-economic and political transformation induced by Deng Xiaoping's post-Mao reform beginning in 1978. Under a new state leadership, the reform released China from the Maoist economic planning and ideological conflicts, as well as opened the country to the rest of the world. When a dynamic market economy was gradually established in the country, China also became a great magnet for foreign capital. Often considered the counterpart of the neo-liberal practice, which originated in the United Kingdom and the United States of America since the late 1970s, behind this historical transformation lay a pro-development mode of political-economic practice that had been increasingly embraced by the post-Mao Chinese state particularly since the early 1990s.¹ It responded to "the progress of neo-liberalization on the world stage" and its "greater openness to capital flow" that have put pressures on different geographic localities.² More importantly, it was driven by China's own aspiration to national self-strengthening and modernization under the new conditions of contemporary globalization.

Inspired by Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum or the so-called 'Bilbao effect', communicating positive images to promote cities has already become the most sought among various strategies to attract capital investment in an increasingly competitive global economy. Chinese cities quickly picked up this strategy to brand and market themselves through constructing their own flagship architectural projects that often involved the participation of renowned international architects. In the cases of Olympic Beijing, in particular, and Shanghai to a lesser degree, the Chinese state acted resolutely to seek and promote an interaction between China and the West in constructing high-profile architectural projects of national significance. The spectacle of iconic buildings not only became an expression of audacity backed by the country's recent economic achievement, but also openly asserted its new aspirations in an age of neoliberal globalization.

Guy Debord argues that "the spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images."³ For Debord, it consolidates and reproduces the hegemony of social and power structures through a synthesis of consumption, commodity fetishism and the mass media. Examining the representation of the social world following a more analytical approach, Pierre Bourdieu offers insights into the economics of symbolic capital in the form of distinction that is produced and circulates in fields of cultural production and consumption.⁴ It is argued that symbolic struggles over distinction is one significant aspect of the field of social and power struggles, as well as determines partially the reality of the objective classification.⁵ The spectacle can be accordingly considered symbolic capital and marks of distinction that are ready to be transformed into more tangible economic capital and political capital. Not constrained to the social world, David Harvey relates Bourdieu's idea of symbolic capital to the contemporary process of globalization where traditional "monopoly privileges" have been significantly diminished.⁶ Harvey argues that distinctive and non-replicable cultural claims have been increasingly sought by different localities across the globe as collective symbolic capital has a significant drawing power upon the flow of capital in the recent bout of uneven geographic development.⁷ In addition to its effect of social stratification and its oppressive nature, the spectacle of iconic buildings often associated with the place-bound identity has thus become one of the most powerful constitutive elements in the competition for global capital flows and local economic growth between cities, regions and countries.⁸

Existing literature on the topic of emergent high-profile architectural projects is rich. Architectural historians and critics tend to characterize iconic building form within the discipline of architecture. For instance, Charles Jencks considers it as a new kind of expressive landmark that challenges the previous tradition of the architectural monument or 'celebrity architecture' through overthrowing any concern for decency and deference. It is an iconic work of an iconic architect that is sought after by everyone and everywhere.⁹ Nevertheless, so far geographers and social critics have dominated the discourse on the phenomenon of new flagship architectural projects across the globe, for instance, David Harvey and Sharon Zukin.¹⁰ Inclining to Marxism in approach and examining the new physical and social landscape represented

by the spectacle of iconic buildings, they tend to emphasize its association with the interests of capital accumulation often considered socially destructive and prone to further stratification and hegemony of society.

When significant attention has been drawn to China's rapid urbanization and "transnational architectural production,"¹¹ some scholars interested in how the phenomenon unfolded in China are apt to align themselves with a similar Marxian stand. Adopting the social theory of spectacle and symbolic capital, Anne-Marie Broudehoux and Xuefei Ren investigate China's highest-profile architectural projects through a lens of market logic and power relation in both geopolitical and social terms.¹² Critical of its affiliation to the state power and oppressive potential, their works either observe the production of architectural spectacle in search of branding as a means of social control, or at least they consider it as self-assertion of China's rise as a geopolitical power and facilitating restructuring of territorial social elites. Meanwhile, there is attentive work dedicated to design and contextual aspects of China's new flagship architectural projects. Not concerned with social theory and its critical perspective, in his study of Beijing's emergent territories of urban production, Peter G. Rowe reveals certain situational logics that the architectural projects responded to and were defined by in their place, time and design.¹³ Viewing them as being conservative with regard to Beijing's earlier urban compositional principles and features in an abstract manner, Rowe argues that its new architectural geographies offer forward-looking design opportunities that further enhance the already distinctive character of Beijing.¹⁴ When examining China's new landscape, Jianfei Zhu however adopts both a long historical view and the idea of "capitalist world-system" from Immanuel Wallerstein.¹⁵ Aware of their nature as "a spectacle with great symbolic capital," he relates the flagship projects to "a moment in China's own history in modernization and integration with the global community."¹⁶ Zhu states that the iconic buildings materializing cutting-edge architectural ideas serve as "a representation of a new nation, its aspiration and a new state leadership," as China searches continuing national self-strengthening and modernization as well as dialogue with the core nation-states of the world.¹⁷

In short, a significant body of research concentrated on the production of iconic buildings in China have been made. When adopting critical social theories, it tends to examine the question from a Marxian standpoint emphasizing power struggles between classes or society and state authority within China. When looking into its architecture and disciplinary implication, it often lacks a politico-social concern and politically critical analysis. When adding historical and world-system dimensions to the social and formal analysis, it does not single out the phenomenon as a primary problem, but investigates it as merely an episode integrated into the country's long national and formal development. In response, this paper aims to focus on the collaboration between China and well-known international architects in producing new global architectural icons. While embracing the concept of spectacle and symbolic capital, it is intended to question the conventional Marxian approach and comprehend the spectacle in relation to China's present national development and geopolitical positioning in the world. For this purpose, three prestigious new architectural icons of modern China designed by overseas star architects in Beijing are selected for a close observation. They are the Grand National Theatre (G.N.T.), the C.C.T.V. headquarters (C.C.T.V.) and the National Olympic Stadium (N.O.S.).

A Contrasting Metaphor

Given a site in the symbolic centre of Beijing, the Grand National Theatre is arguably the most important public building of China at the advent of the new millennium. Towards the southwest of the intersection of the central axes of Beijing, on the southern side of Chang'an Avenue opposite the Forbidden City, and on the western side of the Great Hall of the People that flanks Tiananmen Square, the G.N.T. occupies a site of 118,900 square metres.¹⁸ Designed by Paul Andreu of ADPi in association with Beijing Institute of Architectural Design, the main body of the building is a giant oval shell with a span of 212 metres from east to west, 143 metres from north to south, and a height of 46.68 metres.¹⁹ With a spatial structure made up of 148 arch-shaped steel trusses, it is covered with about 30,800 square metres of Japanese-made titanium plates, and about 6,700 square metres of French-made ultra-transparent glass that imitates a curtain opening gradually from top to bottom on the northern side of the shell facing Chang'an Avenue.²⁰ The ellipsoid shell as an object is then completely surrounded by an artificial lake that makes it look like it is floating on water. When housing the national performance centre in a modern structure of novelty and innovation at the centre of Beijing, the N.G.T. is now one of the most preeminent cultural icons of modern China.

At the turn of the century, the N.G.T. was the first of a number of large public buildings in Beijing commissioned to internationally renowned architects through international competitions. In comparison with other projects, the N.G.T. had long been conceived on the same site since the 1950s when the state decided to reconstruct Tiananmen Square and build the Ten Buildings to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the People's Republic. While the project

was postponed at the time, design schemes in conformity with a National Style had been produced.²¹ They were indifferently approximate to the formal language of the Great Hall of the People and the Museum of Revolution and History on the two sides of nearby Tiananmen Square. A dramatic change was however heralded by a two-round process of international competition organized by the city government for the N.G.T. between April 1998 and August 1999. No selected entry was considered satisfying the expectation during the first round, as the government was keen on having a first-class international performing arts venue and a creative architectural statement to display its ambition towards the world. Thereafter, in contrast with his original idea of a rectilinear box, Andreu's renewed design embracing a completely new form of giant ellipsoid dome was picked as the winning scheme in the second round.²²

This wilful form that seemed radically violating convention and the context of Tiananmen Square triggered an intense debate. Supporters from a young generation of architects and intellectuals considered the design progressive, forward-looking and able to bring Beijing and China a new iconic building in the twenty-first century. However, resentment and criticism towards the futuristic blob were overwhelming. A group of outraged academicians from the China Academy of Science and Engineering and senior architects took their protests to media and the central government, and accused the Andreu scheme of unnecessary high cost, being unreasonable and impractical, and probably most importantly, ignoring the context of Tiananmen Square. Local Beijingers were also sceptical of whether the giant glass-and-titanium dome would become a source of dreams or rather bring Beijing and China shame. They joked about it by "claiming it resembles a colossal turtle egg or, worse, a floating silver turd from outer space."²³ Driven by the urge to present a new image of Beijing and China to the world, decisive to show its power and confidence through a daring architectural statement, the government sided with those supporting Andreu's design. Despite the prevalent challenge and criticism, the construction of the project was started in April 2000. Upon its completion in July 2007, the G.N.T. became undoubtedly a new landmark and iconic building that contributed to China's visibility on the world stage.

It is the controversial design of the N.G.T. in relation to its significant location and immediate context that underlies its overpowering iconic effect. According to Andreu, rather than respecting the context through copying and imitation, his scheme was aimed at producing a resonance by putting different architectures together. Testifying to this claim, while its symmetrical and primitive form in association with a modest height indicates an implicit consistency with the characters of majesty and horizontality of Tiananmen Square and Beijing, the N.G.T. deviates significantly in formal language from the existing monumental buildings and the urban fabric. It presents a sharp contrast to the centuries-old Forbidden City through a glittering futuristic dome in combination with the latest modern materials. Embarking on a more neutral abstraction and minimalist approach in overall building form, it also distinguishes itself from the Great Hall of the People and the Museum of Revolution that adopted Western-classical proportions in combination with socialist realism. It is this upsetting of decency and deference that not only provoked resentment, but also contributed to the iconicity of the N.G.T. The futuristic, modern and neutral design was clearly intended to make the building a distinctive metaphor for departure from the past of ideological conflicts towards a promising future.

The Typological Campaign

Beijing in 2001 won its bid for the 2008 Olympic Games, a mega-event that could generate local urban economic growth, and promote Beijing and China through extensive global media coverage. To build a new image of Beijing to impress the world audience became the first imperative. International design competitions were promptly embarked on by the government to seek international star architects to design groundbreaking new architectural landmarks for Olympic Beijing. The headquarters of China Central Television designed by the 2000 Pritzker Prize winner Rem Koolhaas and his partners from O.M.A. in association with East China Architectural Design & Research Institute became a preeminent representative of those new landmarks. Located in Beijing's new Central Business District close to the intersection of Chang'an Avenue and the city's Third Ring Road, the C.C.T.V. headquarters in combination with another building, the Television Cultural Centre, and some affiliated facilities composed a complex with a total area of 558,000 square metres.²⁴ Aimed at integrating the entire process of TV-making into a collective of interconnected activities, the C.C.T.V. building is made of a three-dimensional loop with two slightly oblique towers rising from a common platform and joined by a giant 75 metre cantilevering L-shaped overhang on top.²⁵ The building is then wrapped by an exoskeleton structure of triangulated grids immediately underneath its tempered glass surface that not only serve as the building's primary support, but also stretch and contract in density according to the actual stress and load distribution. While the seemingly dangerous gross shape is deceptive of the laws of gravity, the structural framework made visible reveals a tangible dialectics between formal aesthetics and structural integrity.

Bending six angled tubes into the loop equivalent to a 180-storey building, the C.C.T.V. building presents a claim to substitute an interdependent, reciprocal and “truly” three-dimensional experience for the banal typology of one-dimensional skyscraper that is hierarchical and only thrusts relentlessly upwards.²⁶ Competing against other renowned international architects including S.O.M., K.P.F., Philip Johnson, Toyo Ito, Dominic Perrault, Koolhaas’s winning of the commission in 2002 was attributable to his response to the government’s desire for a distinctive architectural icon with an outcry against the typology of skyscraper.²⁷ When condemning that the skyscraper has been widely adopted by Asia to the exclusion of almost all others, and yet exhausted and not keeping pace with contemporary business and urban life, Koolhaas put himself against all the 300 skyscrapers that have been planned for Beijing’s Central Business District.²⁸ Arguing that “the 301st would certainly be a faint echo, not the desired landmark,” Koolhaas designed an exceptional mutant, which is a big bulky looped-tube shape with a seventy-storey height, and most importantly, not a skyscraper.²⁹

For Koolhaas, the C.C.T.V. building is a desirable architectural manifestation for his prolonged formal and programmatic investigation to date. It started from promoting a “culture of congestion”³⁰ that was driven by technology and economics and materialized by the skyscraper in Manhattan. It evolved to argue for a “theory of Bigness” that “can sustain a promiscuous proliferation of events in a single container.”³¹ It denounced lately the skyscraper as an obsolescent symbol of business that “can deny instead of promote interaction and communication,” and thus urged on “new configurations of the contemporary metropolis.”³² As a landmark of bigness and “a single entity in which all parts are housed permanently – aware of each others presence,”³³ the C.C.T.V. headquarters offered Koolhaas’s latest radical campaign to “kill the skyscraper” a concrete physical form. Adopting the digitalization of design, and facilitated by fast-growing local building capabilities, it was not only on par with the contemporaries in the global architectural production, but also pioneering arguably its most cutting-edge formal, programmatic and tectonic experiments. It is no exaggeration to say that the C.C.T.V. building in Beijing has constituted a significant event in the development of the discipline of architecture in modern China as well as in the world.

The C.C.T.V. headquarters shares some common features with the G.N.T. Nevertheless, whereas the G.N.T. generated a contrasting resonance with its immediate historic urban context, the C.C.T.V. building gained its vantage point through patronising Koolhaas, one of the most iconic world celebrity architects who has persistently shaken the global field of architecture with idiosyncratic propositions. Given an unprecedented big looped-tube form and daring tectonic expression, the C.C.T.V. building launched a contemporary iconography for Beijing and China onto the world stage.

The Symbol for Olympic Beijing

Among the thirty-one stadiums prepared for Olympic Beijing, the National Olympic Stadium was the centre stage for the Olympic spectacle. Its design was attributed to another two laureates of the Pritzker Prize, Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, in collaboration with China Architectural Design & Research Group and Chinese artist Ai Weiwei. Joined by another two major sports facilities, the National Gymnasium and the National Aquatics Centre, the N.O.S. was situated in the Olympic Park on the northern extension of the central axis of Beijing on which all major historical landmarks of the city are located. Conceived by the designers as a gigantic collective vessel seen from both a distance and close up, the N.O.S. was however nicknamed the Bird’s Nest for its interwoven steel structures resembling a bird’s nest. Embracing a dramatic spatial grid-like formation, it achieved a pure and minimalist bowl shape seamlessly integrating its structure, facade and roof.³⁴ When enjoying a saturated media exposure through the 2008 Olympics, the Bird’s Nest together with the other iconic sports facility the National Aquatics Centre, nicknamed the Water Cube, became the much-celebrated symbol of Olympic Beijing and modern China.

The symbolic significance of the N.O.S. has been emphatically illustrated through its strategic location aligning it with all the most important landmarks of Beijing. More importantly, it was the central stage of the Beijing Olympics including housing the spectacular opening ceremony directed by internationally renowned Chinese director Zhang Yimou. This emphasis could only be explained by what Beijing hosting the Olympics meant to the country and the nation. The Olympics as a potentially highly profitable mega-event could generate local economic growth and urban regeneration, and provide opportunity for image building in global interurban competitions. Yet the 2008 Olympics involved much higher stakes for Beijing and China, namely “they represented to the world China’s rise as a new global power, backed by the dynamic Chinese economy and consolidated under the rule of the Communist party.”³⁵ In association with such an extraordinary national symbolism, the project of the N.O.S. surely aspired to a great new

architectural icon to promote the Beijing Olympics. It was similar to the projects of G.N.T. and C.C.T.V. headquarters in search of reputable overseas architects and outstanding designs through international design competitions. In October 2002, the government organized a competition with an “overwhelming number of international design teams and jury member” to make Beijing “gather the best architectural designs from the world for Olympic stadium.”³⁶ Among thirteen invited entries including eight from established international firms and three from joint ventures, Herzog and de Meuron’s design was again challenged by local cultural conservatives for a similar reason. Yet it was picked as the winning scheme by the thirteen-member jury whose six architectural experts were all international architects including prominent figures such as Rem Koolhaas, Kisho Kurosawa, Jean Nouvel, and Dominique Perrault.³⁷

Winning the Pritzker Prize one year later than Koolhaas in 2001, Herzog and de Meuron’s work has been considered among their contemporaries as a primary counterpoint to Koolhaas’s pursuance of a programmatic synthesis, and become itself an icon in architecture.³⁸ Since their early presence in the field of architecture in the late 1980s, Herzog and de Meuron have been identified as “an anomaly within the contemporary architectural avant-garde.”³⁹ Rejecting the external influence of function and program as well as denouncing the stylistic expression, they assumed a basic adequacy of architecture’s inner materiality and tectonics.⁴⁰ In contrast to their contemporaries often interested in “radical geometries and cross-disciplinary forays”⁴¹, Herzog and de Meuron deliberately confined themselves within the conventional architectural discipline. Somewhat suppressing image and iconography, they decided to focus on normative materials, technique and constructions in search of their fundamental nature and unexpected formal potential.⁴² Frequently presenting overly simple and even austere forms, their work was often intent on impressing people with certain radicalism and novelty in architectonics that were yet an outcome of creative handlings of the most typical materials and structures. In recent years, their highly exposed distinctive work made them two of the most sought-after international architects. On par with Koolhaas, they are iconic figures in global architectural production, who have shaped arguably another distinctive theme for the development of the discipline of architecture in the world.

Like the C.C.T.V. building to Koolhaas, the N.O.S. offered Herzog and de Meuron a great opportunity, willingly supported by the Chinese state in various senses, to expand their exploration of the new formal potential of architecture’s inner materiality and tectonics. As a result, it surprised the global audience with its imaginative spatial grid-like formation in which structure, façade and roof are identical and seamlessly integrated. Images of the gigantic ‘tactile’ material form were circulated all over the world due to the saturated Olympic-related reporting. In conjunction with the mega-event of the Olympics, with great marks of distinction attached to its overwhelming tectonic form as well as the name of the star architects, the N.O.S. served as another predominant architectural icon that represents the new Beijing and modern China.

A New Symbolic Form

The three flagship projects of national significance have all demonstrated a decisive attempt of the Chinese state to engage with the transnational architectural production in the age of contemporary globalization. They exemplified collectively a spectacle of iconic buildings intent on showcasing Beijing and China in the global media. Prestigious international architects and their signature designs were preferred by the government, almost in ignorance of the criticism and opposition from local conservative academicians and architects as well as the public. Receiving great support from the state that mobilized enormous economic capital, political power and other resources for their realization, these bold architectural statements served as an overpowering exhibition of symbolic capital. Branding Beijing as an emerging global city, they reshaped the image of China as an open, modern and forward-looking new nation on the world stage.

Underneath the spectacle of the signature buildings that bore the name of superstar architects, the economy of symbolic capital and market logic were at work. The marketing of architecture in search of symbolic capital and instant fame in the world marketplace was foremost reflected by the Chinese state’s eager patronage of the prominent overseas architects and their speculative architectural experiments. Being associated with these iconic architects and their cutting-edge designs, China gained the status of being a sophisticated and open-minded patron of global architectural culture. Nevertheless, the struggle for symbolic capital, driven by the recent bout of capitalist globalization, was most conspicuously manifested by the signature buildings themselves. With their pervasive images circulated instantaneously in the global media, the bold architectural statements facilitated by advanced building technology displayed great marks of distinction. Aspiring to elaboration of distinctive contemporary identities and place branding,

having mobilized enormous economic, political and human resources, these iconic buildings served to offer Beijing and China monopoly privileges in the global competition for tourists and foreign capital investments.

The synthesis of formal inquiries in architecture and the economic and political power of the state generated great marks of distinction that responded to the pressures put on all geographic localities by the global progress of neo-liberalization. Yet the Chinese state has often been accused of adopting a ruthless neoliberal approach to political-economic practice where “considerations of economic growth and development have trumped every other concern, particularly those of democracy and social justice,” as found in David Harvey’s and Wang Hui’s works.⁴³ In accordance with a similar critical stand, the production of iconic buildings in China was frequently criticized for its affiliation to the hegemonic power of the state and elite classes, as well as its association with capitalist acquisition at significant social costs. As found in Anne-Marie Broudehoux’s work, it was condemned for not only enforcing a cruel coalition between the state power and the global capitalism in securing capital accumulation, but also serving as instruments to govern and regulate the Chinese society.⁴⁴ While aligned with Broudehoux in social critique, Xuefei Ren nevertheless states that the phenomenon “has to be understood within a broader conception of power, one that goes beyond pure market logic.”⁴⁵ For Ren, the spectacle of these state-sponsored megaprojects also demonstrated China’s rise as a geopolitical power and a new nation.

Inclining to serving hegemonic power and rampant capitalist acquisition, the spectacle certainly needs close scrutiny. Yet the emergent iconic buildings in China have specificities that could only be comprehended in conjunction with country’s concrete historical conditions, that is, conditions of its national development. Through his critique of the critical theory in the West, Jianfei Zhu questions a confrontational dualism in the Marxian and the Frankfurt School tradition that views the market and state authority in opposition to society.⁴⁶ Critical of the conventional framework focusing on class or state-society relations within a society and its global expansion in a flat universalism, Zhu favours the recent notion of geopolitical critique in the West. He elaborates a concept of relational logic rooted in Chinese tradition and demonstrated in the country’s history of modernization where state authority assumed the leadership. Zhu thus puts forward a relational logic that supports the idea of the state as leader working with market and society in search of balanced development.⁴⁷

Adopting similar relational thinking, this paper argues for a new supplementary reading of the architectural icons under investigation. It first needs to necessitate a pertinent observation of China’s recent socio-economic and political transformation, as these flagship buildings were both its symbolic expression and material component. Understood from a historical perspective, this real transformation reveals a continuation of China’s prolonged pursuance of national self-strengthening and modernization since the late Qing dynasty. In the past, the national project of the Republic and the socialist project of the People’s Republic in the Mao period accomplished the national unification and independence in the age of imperialism. In the present, the post-Mao project led by the new state is striving for economic growth and further national development under the new conditions of global neo-liberalization. From a geopolitical point of view, the historical transformation led by the post-Mao state also manifested China’s new pose in integration with the global community. Engaging in dialogue with its core powers, China is striving to shift from the periphery towards the centre of the capitalist world-system.

Despite the appraisable recent achievement of this dual historical and geopolitical project, China is still at large a developing country falling behind the developed countries and core nation-states in the West. When already holding the high ground, the developed countries have taken for granted the critical attitude towards new high-profile architectural icons with a focus on class and society-state relations. Yet this moment in the history of China’s self-strengthening, modernization and integration with the global community affirms the spectacle of iconic buildings in Beijing. With cutting-edge designs facilitated by advanced construction innovation, these buildings of national significance have offered China great collective symbolic capital. Readily convertible to economic capital and political power according to Debord and Bourdieu, they have provided real supports for the country’s continuing struggles for economic success in the increasingly competitive world marketplace and better global setting in relation to the core powers of the world. Given China’s specific historical and geopolitical situation at this particular moment, it will continue to contribute to the country’s search for further national development.

When the historical conditions are understood, the meaning of this emergent landscape can be revealed. As an outcome of active collaborations between China and prominent overseas architects, these signature buildings brand Beijing and China favourably with great marks of distinction. Enthusiastically sought and promoted by the post-Mao state, they represent this moment of China’s dynamic engagement with market and the global community.

The spectacle of iconic buildings in Beijing is a new historical symbolic form that corresponds with China's national development in the age of neoliberal globalization.

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