It is a characteristic of Olympics broadcasts throughout the world that national distribution systems have a major impact on how narratives are communicated and received. Much of what is written—in this book and elsewhere—deals with efforts by host cities and nations, the International Olympic Committee (IOC), and sponsors to manage the story by scripting and thus affecting what gets transmitted. There are key moments in the course of Olympic rituals when narratives emerge and global impressions are formed, and these are particularly interesting from the perspective of the producer and transmitter. In this chapter, we continue a long research effort by the Centre d’Estudis Olimpics to study modes of transmission and how they relate to intended narratives. We analyze the broadcast, in five countries, of the closing ceremony in Athens, with its “handover” to Beijing.

The closing ceremony and its components form an integral part of the Olympic Games process and contain unique ritual and symbolic value (MacAlloon 1989). Central to this ceremony is the handing of the Olympic flag from the mayor of the current host city to the president of the IOC, who then passes it onto the mayor of the next city to host the Olympic Games. This is the precise moment that a new Olympiad begins.

During the closing ceremony of the Athens 2004 Games, the mayor
of Athens, Dora Bakoyyanis, passed the Olympic Flag to mayor of Beijing Wang Qishan, signifying the closing of Greece’s Olympiad and the beginning of China’s. In a stylized and elaborately produced production, Beijing stepped onto the global stage and presented itself to international television audiences through a combination of a sixty-second video and eight minutes of cultural displays. Within the context of complex regional and international geopolitical relations, this ritual handover and cultural display meant far more than the beginning of the Chinese Olympiad. It was meant to reaffirm the emergence of China as an economic, political, and sporting world power (Xu 2006; Ren 2002).

The representation by international television broadcasters of Beijing’s presentation as Olympic host is an interesting object of study for several reasons. The structure of the closing ceremony meant that Chinese culture was framed within the wider Olympic context, combining universal messages of Olympism with those of national culture. The broadcast commentators were faced with the challenge of interpreting Chinese cultural displays for their respective national audiences. The handover moment also provided an opportunity to comment on Beijing as an Olympic host and for comparisons to be made with other host cities.

A comparative content analysis of five international broadcasters, including NBC (United States), CBC (Canada), TVE (Spain), Televisa (Mexico), and Eurosport (broadcast in English in Europe), was undertaken for this segment in order to identify how Beijing as host city and Chinese national culture were represented in this context, and what type of narratives were adopted by broadcasters. This limited analysis provides an insight into the complexities of controlling the Olympic narratives. Our focus is on the brief moments of global transmission in Athens in 2004, but from them we gain insight into how the opening ceremony of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games may be broadcast internationally and the substantial differences and similarities that exist between national broadcasts.

As China approaches a key moment in its long history, the construction and communication of a desirable identity through the international media will play an important role in determining the reception of the Games by the international community. For the pre-Games period, salient features of Beijing as an Olympic host can be observed through its architecture; through the official symbols of the Beijing Or-
ganizing Committee of the Olympic Games (BOCOG); and, as we claim, through its cultural presentation during the Athens 2004 closing ceremony.

The Olympic Ceremony as an International Stage

The Olympic opening and closing ceremonies are signature opportunities for nations to appear favorably on an international stage. Moragas et al. (1995) focused on the athletes’ parade during the opening ceremony of Barcelona 1992 to provide an extensive analysis of the presentation of nations by international broadcasters in the context of Olympic rituals and protocol. For some nations, marching into the Olympic stadium can be a defining moment of recognition for a people as the sports arena is transformed into a political arena where the state of international relations and modern nationhood are debated (MacAloon 1989; Brownell 1995). The main conclusions of this analysis were that the broadcasts tended to lack analytical content, focused on the national interests of the broadcaster, and in practice were “not conducive to intercultural learning and understanding” (Moragas et al. 1995, 143). The commentaries of the broadcasters served to reproduce standardized representations of national identity and, more often, national stereotypes.

As the athletes parade into the stadium behind their national flags, sometimes in traditional dress, national broadcasters find themselves in the position of commenting not only on the sporting merits of the respective teams, but also on political and cultural issues. The abstract idea of “our” nation is partly constructed through international comparison with “other” nations, which generally occurs through the interpretations of sports broadcasters.

Many of these broadcasters find themselves outside their commentary comfort zone of sport, and the national lens through which they view the proceedings produces a mix of reactions as the different nations of the world parade past them. This involves responses that range from a combination of reverence and respect for nations that are identified as relatively similar in terms of cultural heritage to “our” nation, to trivialization and misrepresentation of national cultures that are viewed as very different or are little known internationally. In some cases “no representation” occurs as national broadcasters ignore na-
tional identities, which happened in the case of Barcelona 1992 when the Chinese state broadcaster did not recognize the representation of Catalan national identity and chose to focus only on the nation-state of Spain in its coverage (Moragas et al. 1995).

While the handover to Beijing occurred in a different context and involved a longer, more complex construction and representation of cultural identity, the limitations and dangers of misrepresentation by national broadcasters were evident. One consequence that we explore in this chapter is increasing effort by the host to establish a presentation in which the risk of missed translation, altered emphasis, or ignoring of significant themes is significantly reduced. In short, the closing ceremony of the preceding Games becomes part of a long-term communication strategy to present the desired identity of the new host.

Planning and Constructing Olympic Host Identity

The Olympic Games of Barcelona 1992, Sydney 2000, and Athens 2004 highlight the attempts made by Olympic Games Organizing Committees to construct positive identities and break with commonly held stereotypes. Moragas et al. (1995) identified the steps undertaken by COOB 1992 in the development of host identity, and which subsequent hosts have replicated:

1. Select a geographical reference for the host. In reality, the idea of a host identity is actually a combination of multiple identities that must be negotiated and represented. While the identity of the host city is central, the Games are generally celebrated in a wider region or throughout an entire country. In some cases different nations exist within the nation-state, which also may require representation (e.g., Catalonia in the case of Barcelona ’92; England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland for London 2012).

2. Define a desired “character” for the host that is realistic but promotes the host’s most positive features. This involves a combination of traditional cultural heritage with contemporary reality and a vision of the future. Combining past, present, and future provides depth to the constructed identity as well as the dynamic notion of change, which is linked to the celebration of the Games and the change this brings.
3. **Choose appropriate symbolic representations of the desired character.**
   The selection and design of symbolic representations of the desired character for the host has become part of the complex process of establishing a look for an Olympic Games. Typical symbols include an emblem, mascot(s), pictograms, color schemes, etc. In addition, emblematic geographic and urban features that symbolize the host may also be used (e.g., the Sydney Harbour Bridge).

4. **Develop an approach for dissemination of the host identity locally and internationally.** The communication strategies adopted by Olympic Organizing Committees have become increasingly complex and wide reaching. Locally, publicity and media campaigns aim to foster popular support and cement political consensus around the staging of the Games. Internationally, this may include advertising campaigns, media, and public relations activities and strategic cooperation with sponsors and other organizations such as tourist authorities.

5. **Create opening and closing ceremonies that represent the host culture in an accessible and appealing way to international audiences.** The international broadcasts of the ceremony present the interplay between two communications processes. The Organizing Committee has a desired cultural message that it encodes through cultural displays typically involving combinations of sport, dance, music, dress, historic enactments, myth and legend, geographic features etc., and the ceremonies are used as a medium. Television acts as a secondary medium that filters the ceremony, determining camera angles, editing sequences and providing commentary that reinterprets the contents and transforms them into a media spectacle for their national audiences. What emanates is an instantaneously arbitrated version of the encoded presentation as reproduced or altered or neglected by the rights-holding broadcaster.

The desire to communicate a rich traditional heritage combined with a modern contemporary image is central to the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games project and was prefigured in the closing ceremony. At the time of writing, Beijing had moved through all but the last of the five stages of the identity construction process described previously. The geographic reference point for the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games is the city itself, but also China as a nation. The definition of the “desired character” for the host and its symbolic representation has been undertaken through typical Olympic image construction activities. This process has involved constructing national and local cultural messages that can be understood by international audiences. For as Dayan and
Katz (1992) have observed, while the nation is central in the Olympic Games, the Olympic host's ability to construct its image requires that celebrations of nationhood combine with a commitment to internationalism as well.

Narrating the Olympics

The methodology adopted for this limited study closely follows the work of Moragas et al. (1995) in their international research project *Television in the Olympics*. The object of this study was much narrower, focusing on the handover of the Olympic flag to Beijing and its presentation as the new host city of the Games. A limited sample of five international broadcasters were selected to provide diversity in terms of the narrative styles adopted and the cultural interpretations undertaken. This sample provides an indication of the similarities and differences between national broadcast representations of the same phenomenon.

Semantic fields were established to provide systematic comparison between the broadcast segments, and included the representation of: Olympism and universal values; evaluation of the host; the initial presentation of Beijing as host city; and the interpretation of Chinese cultural displays.

The comparative model adopted is based on the integral role that commentators play as primary narrators and interpreters of an event. Not only the content of what is said, but also differing verbal styles, reflect the disparate roles of commentators with respect to their audience. As observed in *Television and the Olympics*, the narrative approach a commentator employs directly influences how an audience perceives what is being displayed visually, and these differences can be used to compare how broadcasters around the world portray international events and the effect this may have on local audiences. All of the broadcasts were transcribed and interpreted by the researchers using semantic fields that enabled direct comparison.

The results of the research were compared with three narrative approaches identified by Moragas et al. (1995)—history, celebration, and entertainment—underscoring the fact that most broadcasts employ a combination of the three, or shift in style and tone during different segments. It is important to emphasize that the broadcasts do not directly represent their country or culture, but because commentators are
“chosen” and therefore accepted by their respective national culture, their commentary can offer valuable insights into more general cultural tendencies.

**The historical approach** views the ceremonies as part of a historical cycle, as a unique event taking place at a specific moment in history. The narrative focuses largely on the importance of Olympic tradition, the symbolic nature of events and rituals, and the transcendent, universal values that sport provides. The commentator adopts the role of an *observer*: their tone and language suggest that an exceptional, unforgettable event is taking place, and that they are lucky to be there as a mere observer of history. Thus, they intervene only to introduce or highlight the importance of events taking place; their solemn, formal style and rare verbal intercession evoke a sense of personal awe, which in turn implies a certain respect for the tradition of the Olympics.

**The celebration narrative** presents the ceremony as a lively party or festival. The style adopted is less transcendent and more informal; nevertheless, commentators continue to pay attention to cultural significance. Broadcasters derive their emotion from “the party of youth, the festival of humanity” inside the stadium. Music and dance become a common language, and the exuberant, superlative tone utilized during art, music, and dance segments reflects an intercultural connection. In order to convey the excitement and happiness taking place inside the stadium, the commentator becomes a participant; through their enthusiastic tone, they encourage viewers themselves to take part in this unique celebration.

**The entertainment approach** pays less attention to culture, Olympic ritual, and mythology. Commentators, whose job is to amuse local audiences, react to what visually unfolds in the stadium, mirroring the improvisational way in which a sports broadcaster calls a live game. In this manner, sport, not the opening or closing ceremonies, becomes the central spectacle of the Olympics. Commentators tend to describe images that audiences can see themselves, without delving far into their cultural depth or meaning. This approach tends to be characteristic of highly competitive broadcast markets, where stations must attract maximum audience or maintain their reputation as the “best.” The commentator plays the role of an insider, presenting the spectacle as “full of surprises” for the audience. Their status as an informed expert, who already knows the events about to take place and hence is never overawed, implies a position of omniscience.

Also characteristic of entertainment presentations is the element of
triviality. Commentators tend to distort basic cultural elements and ritual meanings through their intended humorous or entertaining comments, often coming at the expense of others. Triviality is not necessarily synonymous with the informality characteristic of many “celebration” broadcasts, but demonstrates a fundamental lack of consideration for certain cultural acts or countries.

In addition, the amount of commentary as well as the narrative’s depth and focus can reveal other disparities between broadcasts. The length of commentaries, including duration and amount of comments made, varies considerably and has significant implications for local audiences. In general, the more “historical” a broadcast, the less talk there is; vice versa, the more entertaining broadcasts tend to be filled with talk. Despite the abundant commentary, not many entertainment broadcasters make analyses with respect to cultural anthropology, or elucidate the significance of cultural elements. In this manner, excessive description becomes a way to conceal the inability to interpret culture. Hence the observation of “richness of description, poverty of interpretation” emerges, in which commentators present a litany of seemingly irrelevant facts in order to maintain an active commentary when they otherwise do not know what to say.

The systematic comparison of the different broadcasts’ content within the context of the existing theoretical framework enabled the researchers to draw some initial conclusions regarding the presentation of Beijing and Chinese culture that may affect the interpretation of the desired identity of the host.

A key part of the mediation process by the television broadcasters occurs with the aid of the official ceremony media guide. The guide is prepared by the Organizing Committee of the Games in collaboration with the IOC and is designed to provide broadcasters with a basic insight into the structure and contents of the opening and closing ceremonies. The 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games marked a watershed moment in the establishment of the opening and closing ceremonies as mediated performances. The heightened cultural complexity and symbolic value of the ceremonies in Seoul 1988 and Barcelona 1992 increased the need for more developed materials for broadcasters. The media guide has become an essential tool for both the Organizing Committee and the broadcasters, as the former attempts to inform and to some extent control the contents of the broadcasts, while the latter often rely on the guide in the construction of their narratives.

This document remains a closely guarded secret so as to avoid leak-
The Olympic Flag Handover Ceremony and the Presentation of Beijing as Host City

In order to understand the results of our study of the closing ceremony and its representation of Beijing and Chinese culture by international television broadcasters, it is necessary to provide a more extensive description of events during the handover of the Olympic flag in Athens and the official presentation of Beijing as host city.

The handover of the Olympic flag from host city to new host city is a central element of the closing ceremony of the Games and is characterized by its ritualistic significance. In more recent times, under the presidency of Juan Antonio Samaranch, the handover became perhaps the most eagerly awaited moment of the proceedings, as Samaranch declared the Games in question to be “the best ever.” This moment of judgment was interpreted as the seal of approval for the host city and confirmation of its success in staging the world’s largest sporting event. Controversially, these magic words were not spoken in the closing ceremony of Atlanta 1996, but were used at Sydney 2000. The new president, Jacques Rogge, has subsequently ended this practice, stating that the Olympic Games is a sporting contest between nations, not between host cities.

The structure of this section of the ceremony forms part of IOC protocol and involved the entrance to the stadium of the mayor of Athens, carrying the Olympic flag, together with the mayor of Beijing. The mayor of Athens then presented the flag to the President of the IOC who passed the flag to the mayor of Beijing and waved it to the applause of the crowd. The president of the IOC then declared the Athens Games closed in accordance with the Olympic Charter: “I declare the Games of the XXVIII Olympiad closed and in accordance with tradition, I call upon the youth of the world to assemble four years from now in Beijing.”
These are the only words spoken live in the stadium during the twenty minutes of handover and the presentation of Beijing. The cameras then cut to the giant video screen in the stadium, where a sixty-second film of Beijing and its preparations for the Games was shown. The video was directed by the internationally renowned film director Zhang Yimou and contained sequences of traditional and modern Chinese culture underpinned with the central message that Beijing welcomes the world to celebrate the Olympic Games in 2008. The video was the centerpiece of the presentation of Beijing and functioned as an advertising spot for the city that was broadcast live around the world, constituting an unprecedented opportunity to communicate carefully constructed messages about Beijing and the Chinese culture to an international audience. The images moved fluidly between traditional and modern Chinese cultural heritage, which was represented by images of the Chinese opera, the Great Wall of China, temples, traditional dance, and dragon costumes. This was combined with images of modern Beijing’s skyscrapers and new cultural spaces. These elements provided a backdrop for the people of Beijing, who were the protagonists of the video. People of all ages appeared, many playing sports, from teenagers with an NBA-style basketball look to a businessman in a suit hurdling bicycles. All of them were smiling and welcoming the world to Beijing.

The cultural display continued into the stadium as the video linked almost seamlessly into a modern dance involving fourteen young Chinese women wearing contemporary dresses and carrying traditional instruments, which culminated in a solo performance of a traditional red-streamer dance. The red-streamer dance provided a link to the Beijing 2008 logo, representing “dancing Beijing” as a symbol with its roots in ancient Chinese civilization but with a modern day application that represents change and the opening up of the city to become an international meeting point of cultures (BOCOG 2005).

While the dancing took place, stilt walkers entered the stadium carrying large red lanterns and moved around the athletes gathered on the track. Lanterns are a relatively easily identifiable Chinese symbol that form part of traditional culture and are used during certain festivals, adding to the sense of celebration for the Olympiad that had just begun.

This was followed by more dancing, this time combining elements of tai-chi, which again would be potentially recognized by an international audience, and the traditional martial art of Wushu. A group of
children then entered the stage to perform Beijing Opera in traditional dress and masks.

The final part of the presentation of Beijing was the emergence of a young girl from the center of a giant red lantern who sang “Jasmine,” a Chinese folk song whose lyrics talk of blossoming flowers and welcoming friends and families. Two banners were then unfurled to reveal a message of welcome to the world to come to Beijing in 2008 to celebrate the Olympic Games.

This ended the nine minutes that Beijing had to communicate to the world. The combination of tradition and contemporary Chinese culture and references to Zhang’s films (e.g., the use of lanterns) appealed to Western audiences, but some critics viewed this as predictable and were looking for content that would surprise international and Chinese spectators (Zhang 2006). Zhang would have to rely on the world’s national television broadcasters to interpret the contents accurately and comprehensively, and from a Chinese perspective, positively.

How would the broadcasters interpret the subtle yet complex mix of traditional and modern Chinese culture, the humanistic dimension of the “people’s Games,” the open messages of welcome to the world and their significance in the wider political and economic context of international relations? Had they done their preparation for this moment and carefully considered how to frame the presentation of one of the world’s historically most influential national cultures? Our study suggests some answers to this question and, in so doing, offers a sense of the difficulties that Beijing (or other organizing committees) will face in producing a story for the world.

International Television Olympic Broadcast Narratives: Representing Beijing and Chinese Culture

The analysis of the selected television broadcasts of the handover to Beijing and the new host city’s presentation is structured thematically. The handing over of the flag from Athens to Beijing occurred amid highly regulated Olympic protocol providing the broadcasters the opportunity to commentate on the universal messages of Olympism, reflect on the success of Athens as a host city, and look toward 2008 and anticipate the coming Games in Beijing.
Olympism and Universal Values

The commentators from CBC, Televisa, and to a lesser extent NBC made reference to the universal messages of Olympism following on from the IOC president’s speech. NBC and Televisa commentators highlighted the importance of Jacques Rogge’s message to respect others, referring also to the doping issue and the need to promote clean sport in almost identical words. The CBC broadcasters entered into more depth related to the importance of the athletes, Olympic values, and education:

[Jacques Rogge wants the athletes] to promote the message of the Games, to promote respect for others, promote clean sport and that's what I believe. Every one of these athletes would go home and schools will want them out to speak to their schools and they’ll be able to express the message of what the Games represent. (CBC)

This was combined by an emphasis on tradition, with both NBC and CBC referring to the history of the Olympic flag and the latter going on to discuss the IOC Athletes’ Commission and its role.

Televisa, Eurosport and CBC all commented on the use of the phrase “the best Games ever.” The Mexican commentators focused on the issues of judging the host city and the fact that president Rogge did not follow the tradition of his predecessor in using “the best ever” phrase but instead had called them the “unforgettable” Games, at which point a co-commentator highlighted the case of Atlanta not being recognized by president Samaranch for “obvious reasons,” which were not explained.

The Eurosport commentators picked up on the same issue and then began casting personalized judgments that continued throughout the segment analyzed. There was also some confusion between the IOC presidencies of Rogge and Samaranch, with the former being given credit for closing the Sydney 2000 Games:

He didn’t say they were the best games ever as he has done, did do in Sydney, and for me that was about right. Sydney was the best ever, but this ran a very close second. (Eurosport)

On TVE, there was no discussion of universal values or Olympism during this segment, and the Spanish commentators adopted a celebratory
narrative (Moragas et al. 1995). The entrance of the mayors was met with “Here you have them!” which was followed by a somewhat overexcited description of the events as they occurred on the viewers’ screens and the exclamation that the handover was about to take place:

\[
\text{C2}^1 \text{ This is the big moment!} \\
\text{C1}^2 \text{ The Athens Games are gone!} \\
\text{C2} \text{ Goodbye Athens! Hello Beijing!} \\
\text{(TVE)}
\]

Moreover, the TVE commentators had problems with the pronunciation of both Greek and Chinese names, which was made light of as part of what seemed to be a private joke made public:

\[
\text{[Mayors enter]} \\
\text{C1} \text{ Come on Maria [co-commentator] start to practice. What’s his name?} \\
\text{C2} \text{ Wan Kim San [written phonetically] and next to him, the mayor of Athens, Dora Vayonakis, Vakoyannis, excuse me, Dora Vaco, Vacoyannis . . .} \\
\text{(TVE)}
\]

By way of contrast, the Mexican commentators adopted a much more formal discourse, showing great respect for the mayor of Athens in particular and providing historic factual information about the city and the Greek flag. As in the case of CBC, the fact that the mayor of Athens was a woman was also emphasized.

While the speech of Jacques Rogge and the Olympic rituals provoked general reflection on the values of sport and challenges for the future, the handing over of the flag led into an evaluation of Athens as a host city.

**Evaluating the Host**

It is interesting to note that the presentation of the “new” host of the Games takes place in the shadow of the “old” host. How the “new” host city steps out of that shadow and into the limelight of the international stage constitute key communication challenges.

It is logical that the handover of the host role should produce moments of reflection, or in some cases judgment, among the broadcast-
ers. These comments can be influential in the opinion forming process, despite their subjectivity. For example, one of the comments made by NBC during the handover noted that Greece had “got it together for 2004”:

For all the concerns about the readiness and the organization and security of Greece, these Games ran as smoothly as anyone could have asked. (NBC)

The Eurosport commentators chose to explain their personal experiences of the “village atmosphere” in Athens from what could be interpreted as a position of superiority, being pleasantly surprised by local population and in particular with security levels:

C2 People were being extremely friendly, it’s remarkable how many of them actually speak English.
C2 There has been as you said Simon, a solid presence in terms of security . . . it’s not been in your face . . .
C1 I felt safe and I haven’t been hassled. (Eurosport)

The areas of evaluation for Athens were their preparedness to stage the Games and security, but the sensation created was that this had been achieved against the odds and that question marks perhaps still existed with regards to the hosts’ organizational capabilities. The issue of readiness provided a natural point of comparison with Beijing and the state of preparations for 2008.

The Initial Presentation of Beijing as Olympic Host City

As the flag was handed to the mayor of Beijing, the first comments were made about the new host city and its national culture. NBC, TVE, Televisa and Eurosport commentators all made comments on the Chinese capital’s readiness to host the Games. The consensus was that Beijing was well ahead of schedule in preparing for the Olympics, with the Televisa commentators joking that the venues would be ready before 2006, when Germany was to host the 2006 FIFA World Cup. The argument was that, by contrast to the Greeks, the Chinese were somehow overprepared as hosts and this fit with an image of a country that was developing so rapidly:
An impressive push by the Chinese, not only in sports, but also in general. Its growth in recent years has stood out. The Games are going to be everything you could hope to bring together: the latest technology and also the thousands of years of Chinese history. (Televisa)

TVE commentators focused on the importance of hosting the Olympic Games for China and the opportunity for the country to present itself to the world and demonstrate its organizational capacity. China was portrayed as a country that had changed dramatically in recent times. This idea was also expressed by the CBC commentators who identified the 2008 Olympic Games as the “awakening of Asia,” using the words of President Rogge to refer to China perhaps as a sleeping giant that was stepping into the international limelight.

The other main area of interest for the commentators was China’s sporting potential. NBC stated that China had “tremendous” Games and detailed their medal tally for Athens. CBC stated that China’s performance at Athens had been “wonderful,” their medals totals were “staggering,” and with their largest contingent ever they were “on a mission” for 2008. This mission was likened to Canada’s quest to top the medals table in Vancouver 2010 for the Winter Games and highlighted the importance of the hosts’ sporting performance on home soil.

The Interpretation of Chinese Cultural Displays

The completion of the handover was followed immediately by Zhang Yimou’s sixty-second video, which introduced the cultural display in the stadium. This video was central to the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games communication process and the construction of a desired identity for the hosts.

It was therefore surprising to discover that NBC, as exclusive broadcaster of the Olympic Games in the United States, cut to an advertising break during the entirety of the Zhang video. The opportunity was missed to reach the audience of the world's largest economy and driving force behind globalizing processes. This demonstrated how the representation of the Olympic Games was subject to local editorial decision-making processes that were beyond the control of the organizers of the Games.

Meanwhile, after making a hash of pronouncing his name several times, TVE focused on the prestigious career of Zhang and his contem-
porary cultural relevance in international cinema. The Eurosport commentators talked throughout the video, highlighting that the contents were designed to show how China wanted to be seen by the world, before returning to reflections on their experiences of the transport system and Greek salads in Athens.

The interpretation of the Chinese cultural displays that followed the video could be described as a challenging experience for some of the broadcast commentators. Heavy use of the official media guide was made as the broadcasters struggled to provide commentary and analysis on the mix of traditional and contemporary Chinese culture on show.

The NBC commentators were perhaps the best example of this struggle as they fumbled through a highly descriptive narrative that was interrupted by occasional cultural insights and more frequent sports references. The lantern was identified by the main commentator as:

> uhhh, a very familiar object. The Chinese embroider lanterns in celebrations of big occasions, and that would certainly be the case here four years from now. (NBC).

The co-commentator tried to embellish upon this, providing an explanation direct from the media guide about the use of the lanterns to decorate homes for festivals or the approaching of dignitaries, which established a pattern of commentary that continued throughout the section.

Indeed, the relative lack of preparation on the part of the NBC commentators became increasingly evident and resulted at times in the trivialization and simplification of the cultural displays. The performers were described as “costumed characters that roll into the stadium” combining with the female dancers carrying traditional instruments that created a “different feel than what we saw at the top of the evening with the way the Greeks go about it” (NBC). The “going about it” would appear to be performing a traditional national custom to inform an international audience about the changing cultural reality of a society.

As the cultural display unfolded the NBC commentators did likewise, but added little in terms of accurate or incisive analysis of the spectacle. Moragas et al. (1995) highlighted the fact that the ceremonies tended to be commented upon by sports broadcasters, which affected the representation of the cultural contents. The comments of NBC
were an example of the “sportification” of the cultural displays. The red-streamer dance was observed as follows:

C1 looks like she could do well in a rhythmic gymnastics competition . . .
C2 Classical Chinese dance, accompanied by classical Chinese music [13 second pause]. Some pretty good gymnastics too! (NBC)

Both TVE and Televisa described the dancing as “folkloric” with an emphasis on tradition but recognition that “China is also very international,” which was also commented upon by NBC. The TVE commentators were the only ones to identify the martial arts display and even commented on the relevance of Zen Buddhism.

During the cultural contents the Mexican commentators chose to reflect again on the changes in Chinese society since they came out from behind the Great Wall of China and “opened their doors” (Televisa). China was identified as an important global economic driving force “that also produces Olympic sportsmen and women” (Televisa). The image of China was again framed in the light of its economic progress and work ethic, emphasizing its productivity in manufacturing terms.

The representation of the Beijing opera by NBC could be described as “carnivalesque” as the commentators seemed to be amused by the performers who were depicted as entertainers in fancy dress:

C1 looks like they know how to party too!
C1 They’re dressed for it . . . you know who gets best costume tonight (NBC).

These comments trivialized the performance, as events were described in their own cultural terms that the broadcasters perhaps felt that the audience would understand. The aim seemed to be to entertain the viewers rather than inform or challenge them in any way.

During the opera segment and the concluding Jasmine song, performed by a young girl, commentators from NBC, TVE, and Eurosport made frequent use of the official media guide. This often involved reading directly from it, or making literal translations. While this provided some continuity between the broadcasts, it created uncomfortable moments that did not fit with the narratives of some of the commentators.
For example, the NBC co-commentator suddenly used an extract almost direct from the media guide, which was contrasted by the main commentator’s mix of nostalgia and basic description:

C2 The song talks about how the Jasmine blooms in Beijing, to welcome friends from around the world to our home. The beautiful Jasmine, fragrant and beautiful, aromatic and clean.

C1 And how could you not want to be there in Beijing after that precious little girl on top of the illuminated red lantern? (NBC)

The Eurosport commentators meanwhile had slightly mixed up the martial arts display and the Beijing opera and began reading from the media guide at the wrong time. The performance of the “dance group” was evaluated as simply “terrific,” and the commentators moved on to comments about the Jasmine song before it even began. The British Eurosport presenters ended their commentary with yet more personal reflections, this time with a distinctly national focus (considering this is Eurosport) on the how the people from “back home” would travel to China:

C2 It will be a huge adventure for so many back home who actually got on planes and got here [Athens]. Well, they won’t be able to do that on a quick, short-haul flight, it may take a bit more planning, but I think it could be really special. (Eurosport)

This is followed by a relatively long comment on the superiority of British fans at the Athens games and a nostalgic description of how “our flag looked terrific last night. Certainly stands out” (Eurosport).

After nine minutes of highly planned and expertly executed cultural displays, the broadcasters shifted their gazes toward the cauldron where the Olympic flame was extinguished as the final Olympic ritual of the night. The Beijing Olympiad had begun, and the experience of standing on the Olympic stage as hosts in front of the world’s media would be an important learning experience in preparation for the official opening ceremony.

Findings

The comparative analysis reveals certain common themes could be identified in relation to the representation of Beijing as the next
Olympic host, such as the recognition of China as an emerging sporting superpower and the focus on Beijing’s readiness to host the Games. In this sense, while the evaluation of Athens was generally positive but not entirely convincing, Beijing stepped out of Athens’s shadow with positive strides. There was consensus that Beijing will be ready not only to host the Games, but to potentially top the medals table.

The cultural analysis undertaken in this study reveals a diversity of narratives, which reinforces the findings of Moragas et al. (1995), highlighting multiple representations of the host rather than a coherent desired identity.

The different narrative styles adopted by the broadcasters produced diverse representations of Beijing and Chinese culture as the new Olympic host took center stage. The NBC broadcast was characterized by its entertainment narrative, dealing awkwardly with the cultural contents and preferring instead to remain in the comfort zone of sports. The commentators made light of the cultural displays, likening the performers to gymnasts or costumed party characters that entertained the crowds.

The Spanish commentators on TVE adopted a more celebratory narrative, adopting the role of observers at a festival. The tone of the comments aimed to provoke excitement and emotion among the viewers, providing grandiose introductions to the displays. In-depth cultural analysis is lost in the process of celebrating the moment: the end of one Olympiad and the beginning of another.

Similar but different historic narratives were adopted by the Mexican commentators at Televisa and their Canadian counterparts on CBC. The Televisa broadcast was characterized by reverence for both Olympic traditions and the figures of authority such as the mayor of Athens and the president of the IOC. Beijing and Chinese cultural heritage were also represented with respect, with one of the commentators referring to China as a “great civilization.” The CBC commentators also adopted a more formal approach, signaling the historic significance of China hosting the Games, but they interestingly chose to provide very little commentary on the cultural display. This left the viewers to interpret events for themselves.

Indeed, it is interesting to consider briefly what was not said in the commentaries of the selected broadcasts. For example, Communism was not mentioned, and no overtly Communist symbols were included in the cultural displays. Zhang’s video clearly focused on China’s traditional cultural heritage combined with contemporary, international
messages. There were also no reflections on criticisms of the IOC’s decision to award the Games to the People’s Republic of China. The “two China’s” issue, which has formed part of the Olympic political history, was also not mentioned. The broadcasts were therefore noncontroversial and largely apolitical.

Eurosport was difficult to classify using the narrative framework adopted in this study. The broadcast was not nation-specific and spanned several countries, yet the commentators adopted a more overtly national stance than any of the other broadcasters analyzed. This arguably inappropriate use of the national lens to interpret proceedings was combined with a series of personal evaluations of the broadcasters’ experiences in Athens. Beijing was left at the margin of the broadcast and was referred to partially and inaccurately.

Indeed, in terms of the implications for the international broadcast of the Beijing 2008 ceremonies, the issues of most concern to the ceremony organizers were perhaps the inaccuracies in several of the broadcasts, the examples of flippancy and superficial descriptions, and the awkward use of the media guide as a safety net.

While it would neither be possible nor desirable to standardize the broadcasts of the ceremonies, if the organizers of the 2008 Olympic Games want the constructed cultural identities of Beijing and China, both traditional and contemporary, to be represented accurately and comprehensively, there is considerable work to be done in media relations terms to inform and educate international broadcasters. For example, developments in online and multimedia technologies could be used to provide broadcasters with more support in the buildup to the Games to allow more in-depth preparation of the cultural content that is to be included in the ceremonies, without reducing the surprise factor that is necessary in the creation and communication of the spectacle. While it is the broadcasters’ right to determine the interpretation and representation of ceremonies’ contents, they also have the responsibility to inform audiences. As demonstrated in this chapter, sometimes the broadcasters appeared in certain cases to stray from the message that was being communicated through the ceremonies, which at times resulted in the trivialization of host culture.

The digitalization of Olympic broadcasts through digital television and Internet may provide an important opportunity in some societies for the representation of Olympic traditions and rituals, as well as the representation of nations. Interactive services may provide the oppor-
tunity for viewers in some countries to choose camera angles and commentary (narrative) styles, and to access additional information on Olympic history, rituals, and the host’s cultural displays.

Indeed, the opportunity for viewers to obtain more information may enable some of the gaps in coverage to be filled. The decision of NBC to cut to a commercial break during Zhang’s video demonstrates the importance of commercial content over cultural, but also a missed opportunity for viewers. This could be overcome with replay options and edited highlights content, combined for example with the option of more informed cultural analysis. Interactive television, while altering the “live” experience, could provide viewers with a more personalized experience and the possibility to construct their own narrative.

Conclusions

Only a small minority of the audience will experience the Beijing 2008 Olympic mega-event in person, while the masses will have to rely on the mediated product that is constructed and communicated through the media (Dayan and Katz 1992; Roche 2000).

The mass global appeal of this event means it will be a gauge of societal changes and globalizing processes, contributing, to a limited extent, to a greater understanding of globalization in both “basic” and more “complex” ways (Roche 2006).

In terms of ideas of “basic” globalization, time-space compression may occur around the celebration of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games. As the world looks to one place at the same time, people will be brought together from diverse cultures around a single event. This will be reinforced by the communication of the universal values of Olympism and its system of rituals and symbols that promote notions of peace, understanding, and unity.

These processes will occur within the wider sports media cultural complex and the interdependent relationships that exist between the International Olympic Committee, the media (in particular NBC as U.S. broadcast rights holder), and the sponsors (global and local) that together provide the majority of funding to stage the Games (Rowe 2003). In commercial terms, the Beijing 2008 Olympics are poised to be the most commercially lucrative Games in history, largely as a result of the increasing speed of globalizing processes, while simultaneously
contributing to the acceleration of global economic, social, and cultural exchange.

However, to what extent these exchanges are equal is questionable. Critics of the Games in cultural terms have highlighted the disproportional influence of U.S. and Western European economic power within the Olympic media cultural complex through NBC’s contribution to broadcast revenue and long-term multinational sponsors such as Coca-Cola and McDonald’s. These developments have furthered the “Westernization” of the Olympic Movement, contributing to the “Disneyfication” of the Olympic spectacle (Tomlinson 2004).

The presentation of Beijing as host city during the Athens 2004 closing ceremony highlighted the challenge facing Zhang Yimou as he attempts to please both Chinese and international audiences through the construction of cultural contents of the opening ceremony. As he codes the messages that will construct a desired identity for Beijing and China, the decoding and reinterpretation will occur through the filter of multiple national broadcasts within the context of the Olympic media cultural complex.

The broadcast of the opening ceremony in 2008 will generate individual and collective memories, affecting attitudes and perceptions of China and its people. Judgments will be cast, heroes and villains created, and history “made” as an Olympic discourse is constructed, communicated, consumed, and reproduced.

Through the national television broadcasts, the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games as a global media event will be subject to local interpretations. What Roche (2006) identified as a more “complex” understanding of globalization can complement the “basic” interpretation of globalization. This complexity is derived from the differentiation that exists between the national broadcasts and the existence of agency in the interpretation of events. The results of this limited study reinforce the importance of these interpretations and the need to research the complex and diverse narratives constructed in broadcasting the Olympics.

The risk of misinterpretation and misrepresentation of the cultural contents of the ceremonies and desired host identity from the Organizing Committee’s point of view is high. The official ceremony media guide has become a key tool, and according to this research it forms a fundamental part of broadcast narratives. Despite this, some national broadcasts were still not conducive to intercultural understanding and...
involved frequent inaccuracies and sometimes trivialization of the host for the sake of entertainment.

The challenge for the Games organizers was how to create a balance between accurately informing broadcasters about the ceremony contents and influencing their interpretation in order to homogenize the message comments. This situation is made more complex as certain broadcasters have increased the number of their own cameras in the stadium, increasing the diversity of the visual images received in different countries around the world, and marginalizing the international broadcast signal produced by the Organizing Committee. Through online broadcasting, hypertext and developments in mobile technologies in the digital era, new technologies will have an increasing role to play in informing broadcasters and audiences about the contents of the ceremonies and their cultural and historic context.

The Beijing 2008 Olympic Games are perhaps the most eagerly awaited mega-event of recent times. While the Games will probably become, albeit temporarily, the most watched sports event in history, they are being staged in a country that has experienced exponential economic, social, and cultural change over the past three decades. While “East met West” at the Olympic Games in Tokyo 1964 and Seoul 1988, the staging of the Games as part of the “opening” of China to globalizing forces is particularly symbolic and will involve a more complex challenge for those broadcasters that are willing to rise to it.

NOTES

1. C2 denotes the co-commentator.
2. C1 denotes the main commentator.

REFERENCES


