EVENT HORIZONS

The Capitalist Surrealism of Chinese Burning Man

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ABSTRACT

Burning Man, the prototypical transformational event culture, has been described as “a guerrilla war against alienated spectacle and the commodification of the collective imagination.” At the same time, it has spawned spectacular efforts at the commodification of experience that span the United States, China, and Taiwan. This article follows these transnational flows and considers the circulation and contradictions of capital through a globalizing economy of event cultures. Based on the author’s long-term role as a Burning Man artist and regional event representative, the article provides a comprehensive history of Burning Man’s varied manifestations, transformations, and hybridizations in China and Taiwan. These include authorized events and art installations produced by participants who aim to adhere to the principle of Decommodification espoused by the San Francisco-based nonprofit Burning Man Project, as well as unauthorized commercial copycats, some of which have been financially backed by the Chinese Communist Party, that have sent major art pieces to the main event in the US and attempted to launch ambitious projects in the Gobi Desert. Tracing these connections offers a weirdly scenic vantage point for examining the global collision and recreation of cultural, financial, and political desire. Reflecting on the productive tension between creativity and commodification, the article concludes that Burning Man’s consolidation as a transnational symbol of cultural capital points to an ideological and social convergence between the United States and China, offering a counterpoint to the resumption of Cold War rhetoric that has highlighted a hostile turn in their geopolitical relationship. In so doing, it proffers a surreal, if not utopic alternative to the aesthetic of “capitalist realism” oft said to characterize the contemporary era.

KEYWORDS

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Introduction

Burning Man constitutes “a guerrilla war against alienated spectacle and the commodification of the collective imagination,” wrote Erik Davis five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. A temporary autonomous zone where people could play—or at least play-act—as if there were an outside to the imperium of capital, it offered a sense of liberation, if not a utopian prefiguration of another world. That same year, sociologist Matt Wray wrote with a similar sentiment about his attraction to this “event that seemed largely outside the reach of corporate capital and somewhat beyond the surveillance of the state.” The “emancipatory illuminations” of the playa—the dry lakebed where Burning Man’s main Nevada event takes place—appeared so compelling that even a marketing scholar could prescribe participation as a salve for the totalizing effects of market logic on Western consumer society.¹

Such starry-eyed accounts of Burning Man’s liberatory effects came in the years following the apparent triumph of capitalism over the nominal communism of the Eastern bloc, which for a time had also offered “a site, however fictitious, for the imagination of another world.”² The epoch-shifting collapse of this site for an alternative imagination led Francis Fukuyama to infamously prophecy “the end of history,” and hastened the claim of literary scholar Frederic Jameson that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.

Extending Jameson’s observation into the realm of cultural studies, Mark Fisher coined the pungent phrase “capitalist realism” to figure the emergent political affect and aesthetic of the post-Cold War era, “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it.”³ Nonetheless, he noted a tension in this foreclosure of the imagination by asking: “In the 1960s and 1970s, capitalism had to face the problem of how to contain and absorb energies from outside. It now, in fact, has the opposite problem: having all-too successfully incorporated externality, how can it function without an outside it can colonize and appropriate?”⁴ Such a question followed a reflection on the fall of the Berlin Wall, but may as well have anticipated the eventual service to capital provided by seemingly outside spaces like those of Burning Man.

For all its prescience and perspicacity, Fisher’s discussion did not note that other world-historical event of 1989, the massacre and mass arrests of Beijing’s Tian’anmen Square protestors. This episode consolidated the totalitarian rule of the Chinese Communist Party, foreclosing local political alternatives while paradoxically hastening the country’s global economic integration by consolidating China’s party-state as the planet’s most centralized force of capitalist production.⁵

History had of course not ended in the decades following the apparent triumph of Anglo-American capitalism, and perhaps, neither had the Cold War.⁶ Rather, it had only gotten more surreal, as signaled by the 2018 arrival of Desert Guard, a fifty-foot-tall metal sculpture of a Mongolian soldier, in Black Rock City, Burning Man’s marquee urban manifestation. Financed through Chinese Communist Party–connected companies, the funders of Desert Guard later used its imagery to promote a commercial event, Gobi Heaven, pitched as “China’s Burning Man” and scheduled to


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be held in the Gobi Desert. Gobi Heaven’s social media account went on to post a photo of the team holding a Chinese flag underneath the towering figure, endorsed by a fake tweet from US president Donald Trump with the text, “My God! is wonderful [sic]” (fig. 1). Such commercial use was in contravention of Burning Man’s injunction against commodification, enshrined in its “Ten Principles” (as Decommodification) and legally enforceable through its entry ticket stipulations.

Although Gobi Heaven’s participation in Black Rock City aimed to boost their market appeal to domestic audiences, it so happened that they were not the first or only Chinese manifestation of Burning Man. Unbeknownst to these and similar entrepreneurs, groups of Chinese and Taiwanese participants, like “Burners” from other regions, had already built annual events, such as Dragon Burn and Turtle Burn, which had been authorized by the Burning Man Project, the San Francisco-
based nonprofit organization that manages Black Rock City and appoints representatives to steward the growth of its culture elsewhere. Such regional events arguably extended Davis’s vision of a guerrilla war, and Fisher’s hopes for new openings for alternative aesthetic and political practice, to new terrain.

Even as Burning Man grew a base of adherents who play-acted as if they were beyond the capture of capital, Gobi Heaven’s marketing campaign corresponded to the stunning rise in Burning Man’s political, cultural, and economic value in the US—just one year after their fake Trump post, a 2019 profile of presidential daughter and businesswoman Ivanka Trump revealed that a Burning Man photobook had been strategically placed on her desk, which sat a few blocks away from a major retrospective exhibit about the event, (un)ironically titled “No Spectators,” at the Renwick Gallery of the national Smithsonian Museum.⁶

Seen in this light, despite the late 2010s rhetoric of “decoupling” between a declining US and a rising China, or worse, a new Cold War, the aesthetic overlaps between the spectacular experiences of Black Rock City (and its authorized spin-offs), as well as the commercial ambition of Gobi Heaven, suggest a trajectory of integration rather than difference. In this sense, decades after the “emancipatory illuminations” of the 1990s playa, Burning Man looked less like a guerrilla war against commodification than new terrain for an incipient geoeconomic conflict between the United States and China, even as it served as a site for a perverse form of cultural courtship.

Global convergence of consumer desire, and the role of state actors in shaping it, has precipitated ongoing discussion on how best to characterize political economic difference between the US and China. While many scholars characterize China as a paradigmatic case of “state capitalism,” as opposed to the ostensibly less interventionist mode of the US, others have suggested that such differences may be overdrawn, and that all economies are mixed between state and non-state actors.⁷ For this article, I treat China as a paradigmatic case of what I call “party-state capitalism,” acknowledging the unique role of the Chinese Communist Party in shaping space and society to facilitate its own accumulation of capital. Further, I suggest that thinking through Chinese Burning Man may help us move beyond Fisher’s idea of “capitalist realism,” not toward postcapitalism or postcommunism, but rather to a notion of capitalist surrealism that may better figure the novel aesthetics of the industrial collisions and collaborations of the avowed capitalism of the US and the nominal communism of China—whether they take the form of a Mongolian warrior on the playa of Black Rock City or a dragon egg hatching at an off-the-grid regional event in Jiangsu.

The surreal capitalist “recoupling” of the US and Chinese elite imaginary by way of Burning Man can be read from the lyrical account of science fiction author Chen Qiufan’s visit to Black Rock City in 2018. Chen observed that his campmates, mostly Chinese tech entrepreneurs, there and elsewhere “act as the first generation of pioneers journeying into the virtual New World. They imagine themselves as packs of wolves in the Mongolian plains who can only survive and emerge victorious through bloody combat, incessantly stalking new territory and prey.”⁸ Reflecting on his campmates’ pursuit of success and power, their brazen business networking and status competition amidst the nominally de commodified spaces of Black Rock City, Chen concluded that the “combination of worshiping totems while pursuing practical benefits is quintessentially Chinese.” This behavior is also quintessentially American—as is the myth of a Western frontier, a geographical conceit shared by both great powers—making Burning Man and its Chinese

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manifestations, as frontier carnivals, among the world’s more weirdly scenic places to watch the global collision and re-creation of financial, imperial, and technological fantasy.9

Taking such collisions and convergences as points of departure, this article presents an account of Burning Man’s manifestations and transformations in China and nearby Taiwan, in order to reflect on the circulation of capital through a globalizing economy of event cultures. This account is informed by my personal position as Burning Man Project’s first regional contact for China and Taiwan, as well as an organizer of several of the earliest Burning Man events and art projects in these regions, which means I write from the perspective of both practitioner and analyst and make little claim to critical distance.

As a structuring device, I use authorized to denote these events, projects, and collectives that aim to adhere to Burning Man’s principles and pursue or maintain a formal affiliation with the nonprofit organization that stewards them. These scenes feature people who identify as Burners, a subject position invented and appropriated by active participants that I interpret as signaling a community of practice, (re)produced through collective ritual, conducted in liminal spaces, and conducted explicitly in accord with Burning Man’s Ten Principles (although some Burners aspire to practice such principles beyond the playa), including “Decommodification.”

I use shanzhai, a rich and polysemic Chinese word, to denote companies that treat Burning Man as a marketing brand and seek to appropriate its aesthetic and appeal to promote commercial ventures. This category includes simulated events that tactically manipulate Burning Man iconography or spatial forms, complicating efforts at purification. Shanzhai literally means mountain fortress, a place where outlaws would hole up to resist corrupt authorities and enact a sort of temporary autonomous zone free from the strictures of polite society or rules of commerce. The term was coined in the classic saga Outlaws of the Marsh and gained renewed currency in the 1950s as a way to label small-scale Hong Kong factories that produced low-quality knockoff electronics. It achieved an apotheosis in the 2000s with a profusion of cell phones that shamelessly stole, remixed, and arguably even improved upon “legitimate” products by, for just one example, fusing a flame lighter to a flip phone.10 Some critics have celebrated shanzhai as a kind of liberating, democratic social movement aligned with an innovative, enterprising spirit, with all the contradictions and dynamism such mash-ups can bring. In this light, Black Rock City’s Department of Public Works and Department of Mutant Vehicles, which manage city infrastructure and vehicles, might be considered shanzhai versions of their San Francisco equivalents. It may be generative to theorize Burning Man as a global shanzhai urban movement, a shifting network of ephemeral cities counterposed to the so-called “default world” that burners leave upon entering their evental heterotopia. Here, I humbly use shanzhai to refer to events and companies that explicitly defy the Burning Man Project’s injunctions against commercialization.11

The article proceeds by narrating a chronology of Burning Man culture in China and Taiwan, in both their authorized and shanzhai manifestations. As explained below, both authorized and shanzhai event spaces were populated through overlapping traffic of artifacts, projects, people, and ideas between China and Black Rock City, troubling efforts at typological stability.

The chronology first traces a history of authorized regional events within China and Taiwan before

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turning to shanzhai event projects within China and Taiwan, and continues by looking at how these projects boomeranged back into Black Rock City, often accelerated by commercial travel ventures that promoted Burning Man as a vital site for tech industry networking. The article concludes by considering what these points of evental, economic, and cultural similarity and divergence can tell us about the persistence of “capitalist realism,” or rather its subsumption by what I name “capitalist surrealism” to illuminate fissures, imaginary and actual, in the dominion of capital that binds together the US and China.

Crafting Burner Spaces in China and Taiwan

Burning Man’s early projections of a Californian countercultural beach bonfire into an annual, ephemeral city in the Nevada desert, which grew from seventy to seventy-five thousand people between 1990 and 2019, are extensively documented. Its international manifestations, and their impacts on the Nevada event, are a more recent target of inquiry, with this article and that of Graham St John and Botond Vitos (in this issue) among the first such scholarly accounts. The first formal effort to reproduce Burning Man’s experiential and spatial structure was a Texas fundraiser to support the main event in 1997. Remembered as the first “regional event,” it grew into an annual gathering called Flipside.

Flipside’s success, and interest from other emergent communities, led the San Francisco-based Burning Man organization to develop a plan to legitimize and authorize “official regional events.” This included the codification of Ten Principles, to facilitate the transposition of Burner culture, and the establishment of the regional contact role, a volunteer position appointed by the Burning Man Project and (loosely) bound by a legal contract to foster community growth. Regional contacts serve to certify the legitimacy of events that seek formal recognition and contractual authorization as official regional events. They also help to investigate possible violations of the Burning Man Project’s intellectual property, which can include unauthorized use of Burning Man’s name, iconography, and other trademarked material, for which the Burning Man Project will sometimes threaten or take legal action in the name of protecting its culture from commodification.

Asia was a relatively late entry to the growing cultural economy of regional events, despite my own best efforts. After attending my first Black Rock City burn in 2001, I moved to Taiwan and later to China, and applied and was appointed to serve as regional contact for both regions. It took another decade and increased traffic to and from Black Rock City before China and Taiwan had enough capacity to hold semi-annual multiday events, now known as Dragon Burn and Turtle Burn, respectively. Meanwhile, as these regional events attracted increased media exposure, Black Rock City began diversifying and drawing greater participation from China- and Taiwan-based Burners.

The first authorized spaces of Chinese Burning Man were constructed by participants who identified as Burners and who had visited Black Rock City before the dominant Chinese media narrative of the event as a tech networking festival had consolidated. As a community-building exercise, in 2005 I began hosting an annual Chinese Speaker’s Tea Party on playa. In 2006, I co-organized a two-night Burning Man film festival in Beijing. Four years later in Shanghai, SvenAarne Serrano, an early participant in the Baker Beach burn and pre-Burning Man Cacophony Society events, convened meetings to stir up local interest.

These threads were woven into the first transnational Chinese art installation at Black Rock City in 2013: Enlightenment, a wooden effigy of a meditating man atop a lotus-shaped octagonal platform (fig. 2). Enlightenment sat facing the main effigy of the Man, the namesake wooden structure placed in the center of Black Rock City that burns as the ritual culmination of the week-long Burning Man event. The initial idea and primary design came from Vancouver-based maker space entrepreneur Derek Gaw. To incorporate material contributions from China, I suggested adding a lotus-shaped platform to be covered with petal-shaped fabric swaths calligraphed at the Shanghai home of Nick Kothari and Jen Childs, an American couple who went on to organize the first Dragon Burn. The effigy structure was built mostly by Chinese American and Taiwanese American Burners, and included as the China and Taiwan piece of the larger Circle of Regional Effigies (CORE) project. CORE, originally proposed by then-Hawaii regional contact Andrew Cuniberti, was a scheme to consolidate and showcase the art of Burning Man’s burgeoning regional communities. CORE featured thirty-two regionally produced effigies, many of which received limited logistical and financial support from Burning Man’s Art Department. The pieces were placed in circles around the Man and set alight simultaneously in the world’s largest-ever synchronized art burn.

Figure 2. Enlightenment. China & Taiwan CORE Project. Burning Man 2013. Photograph by Kenny Yu.
China’s (for now) only official Burning Man regional event, Dragon Burn, was named for its eponymous emanation of imperial power and first held in June 2014. To ensure privacy and security, organizers chose a challenging island location near Taihu Lake in Jiangsu Province. At least a six-hour journey from Shanghai, participation required taking a motor vehicle, a boat, and then a long walk. Most of the 282 attendees, a majority of whom were expatriates, had never been to a Burning Man event. Given the conception of the event as an experimental effort, the effigy was a modular oval symbolizing the egg of a dragon (fig. 3). The mountainous site, used as a film set and rock-climbing site, proved impossible to secure, leading to several tense incidents of gate-crashing. The following year, that site was acquired for a private hotel development, forcing the next wave of event organizers to find a new site in the Anji mountains of Zhejiang Province. This second event drew 190 participants, who burned a dragonfly-styled effigy.
In 2016, Dragon Burn, by then run by a growing collective of mostly Shanghai-based volunteers, was again forced to move at the last minute after the site owner informed organizers that they were unable to acquire a permit due to new security arrangements made to prepare for the upcoming international G20 meeting in nearby Hangzhou, which forced the cancellation of all other large-scale events in the area. A new site was found on an island close to the first event site. With 520 people attending, organizers deemed the local community to have grown sufficiently large to justify burning a dragon-shaped effigy for the first time. In 2017, the event returned to the second-year site in Anji and saw a considerable breakthrough in organization, including zoning and self-organization of six theme camps which, like their Black Rock City counterparts, were themed camping zones whose residents collaborated to offer various services and experiences to participants, including dance parties, massage, yoga, and music improvisation. Increasing localization was evident as this was the first year for a Chinese national to produce the effigy—designed by artist Magic Ma, the sculpture resembled three different Chinese characters depending which side it was viewed from: 人 (man), 火 (fire), and 龙 (dragon). This year also featured Dragon Burn’s first temple, styled as a fire-fringed lotus, to serve, like its Black Rock City forebear, as a place for grieving and commemoration, to be ritually immolated toward the close of the event.

By 2018, what had started only four years prior as a semi-colonial expatriate project achieved a considerable degree of sophistication, stability, and local participation, and a new site with room to grow. This was evident in the massive spiral-shaped dragon effigy constructed of a bamboo frame and fallen branches carried from Shanghai, and enthusiastic support from the landlord of the hilly, forested, lakeside venue. In our conversations, the landlord expressed hope that the event would lead to permanent infrastructure and draw more year-round visitors. Approximately half of the eight hundred participants were Chinese nationals, including the first theme camp composed of a majority of Chinese nationals, the BDSM-and-fetish-themed Deeper Joy. Dragon Burn returned the following year to the same site and featured a larger effigy styled as a phoenix—the feminine consort of the dragon. Funded entirely through ticket sales and donations, roughly US$5600 was budgeted for art grants, with thirty-seven out of thirty-eight applicants receiving awards.13

Dragon Burn’s organizers aimed to keep a low media profile and spread via word of mouth, due to China’s tight legal controls on public gatherings. Despite this, the event was visited by journalists from state-owned or affiliated newspapers, including China Daily and Global Times, who published generally positive coverage. Shortly before the gates opened in 2019, the event also survived surprise inspections from the provincial-level Ministry of Culture, which had been tipped off to allegedly subversive behavior. It turned out that the national-level Ministry of Culture was also sponsoring the Gobi Heaven event set to take place later that year, as will be discussed in greater detail in the subsequent section on shanzhai burns.

Across the Taiwan Strait, a distinct but related regional community began burgeoning around the same time as Dragon Burn, and shared several key personnel. Taiwan’s first regional event took place in October 2014, pitched as a “Decompression,” so named after similar regional events initially intended to help returnees from Black Rock City readjust to the “default world.” The event was held on the site of an abandoned beachside hotel next to a small Taoist temple in Honeymoon Bay in Yilan, on the northeast Pacific coast, and featured a rickety bamboo effigy.
standing on the rocky shore (fig. 4), portentously facing San Francisco’s Baker Beach, where Larry Harvey and Jerry James first burned a Man in 1986. Lifelong Yilan resident Fifi Albanese, her American immigrant husband, Dale Albanese, and I served as lead organizers. An unticketed affair graced by a surprise typhoon, feral pigs, 300 humans, and a tsunami, the conditions were so thrilling and traumatic that it took five years to hold a follow-up. Renamed Turtle Burn and again anchored by the Albaneses in collaboration with a volunteer collective, 120 people and five theme camps convened smoothly during the three-day Dragon Boat Holiday in June 2019 at a private campsite atop a mountain in Yilan. Like Dragon Burn and indeed all regional burns worldwide, its 2020 recurrence was postponed as a cautionary measure against the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 4. Bamboo Man effigy, Burning Taiwan 2014, Yilan. Photograph by Tobie Openshaw.
These regional events grew synergistically with increasingly elaborate projects on the playa. After the 2013 immolation of Enlightenment, 2014’s Silk Road-inspired art theme, Caravansary, saw the alignment of Burning Man’s geospatial imaginary with that of Chinese Communist Party leader Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road. As with the CORE installations of the previous year, regional contributions were placed within custom-made canvas shelters meant to resemble a souk, or Middle Eastern market. The team that went on to run Taiwan’s Decompression event contributed a one-stop divination shop, the Taiwan Temple Market, a cross between a temple and a convenience store, two of the most ubiquitous and distinctive spaces in Taiwan. With Fifi Albanese, a dancer at the Taoist Songshan Cihui Temple, we carried from the temple a large banner of the temple’s goddess, Yaochi Jinmu, a thousand amulets, several red lanterns, and assorted dance props and altar pieces. Two doors down, past a Japanese calligraphy lounge, was the Dragon Den Dianpu, a lounge and activity space decorated by the Dragon Burn crew. Momentum from the Taiwan Temple Market project led directly to Taiwan’s “Decompression” one month later.

For the China and Taiwan regional project for the following year’s “Carnival of Mirrors” art theme, I conceived FoxCarn and the Betel Store, which was placed in the same canvas structures that surrounded the Man effigy the previous year. Styled as a luxury retail outlet with a sweatshop hidden in the back, this was a darkly satirical send-up of the relationship between Apple and its Taiwanese and Chinese contract manufacturer, Foxconn (fig. 5 and fig. 6). Overseen by uniformed supervisors, participants lined up to make “iSwag” blinky bracelets in the sweatshop. Upon successful completion of their menial task, they were paid a sum of wage tokens that was insufficient to buy back the product they just made, which went out for “sale” in the Betel Store. Exploited laborers and window-shoppers alike could attempt to “buy” back the iSwag or the Betel Store’s other (un)popular products, including the iGift (“1000 playa dust particles in a pendant, now with 50 per cent more workers tears!”) and the iMan (“20 per cent taller, burns twice as long!”). Given Burning Man’s imbrication with Silicon Valley, the project served as an immanent critique of the alienated labor and commodity fetishism that underwrites the globalization of the event culture, even (or especially) as it nominally adheres to the principle of “Decommodification,” a point to which I will return in the conclusion.

Black Rock City received another and considerably larger and higher-profile project from Taiwan in 2015, entitled Mazu: Goddess of the Empty Sea. This was an ersatz temple dedicated to a popular Taiwanese folk goddess whose likeness has long been used to foster commercial and political networks between Taiwan and China.14 The project was sponsored by the Dream Community, a privately owned arts-themed apartment complex in New Taipei City, already well known for sponsoring samba-inspired street parades across the island. Its owner, Gordon Tsai, who sometimes spoke of his dream of becoming “the Steve Jobs of real estate,” both enjoyed festival atmospheres and valued their commercial potential. Running out of room to build new apartments on his remaining land, Tsai considered ways to extend his operations across the Taiwan Strait toward China.

Mazu’s appearance at Burning Man afforded Tsai an extraordinary opportunity to cultivate connections between Taiwanese, Chinese, and American artists, entrepreneurs, and even politicians. Tsai opted to hire a team of seasoned Burning Man arts builders, none of whom were

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Figure 5. Betel Store, Burning Man 2015. Photograph by Kenny Yu.

Figure 6. FoxCarn, Burning Man 2015. Photograph by Kenny Yu.
Taiwanese or Chinese, to visit Taiwan for design sessions before prefabricating a structure in Reno, Nevada, and moving it to the playa. The Dream Community’s commitment to this project, and their residential and meeting spaces, likewise afforded me an extraordinary opportunity to request Tsai’s support to host an Asia Burner Leadership Summit in May 2015. This brought together all of Asia’s regional contacts and primary event organizers for several days of private meetings and public events. These meetings and events were joined by Burning Man CEO Marian Goodell and founder Larry Harvey, who later attributed his decision to place the Man effigy inside a temple in 2017, as part of the “Radical Ritual” art theme, to this visit to Asia.

The Mazu temple build was fraught and difficult, but the piece, visited nightly by raucous parade troupes, proved very popular on playa before it was ritually burned. This project blurred the boundaries between the promotional and the ceremonial, the authorized and the shanzhai, with the Dream Community’s corporate branding appearing on the red lanterns that adorned the entrance to the temple. The effect was subtle, at least for non-Chinese readers. Tsai also brought along a legislator, Pasuya Yao, who in what was perhaps a world first, later used Burning Man imagery without permission in a television advertisement about “thinking out of the box” as part of his unsuccessful 2018 bid for Taipei mayor. Although the Dream Community opted not to formally participate in Taiwan’s Turtle Burn regional event, they continued to send smaller but still significant contributions to Black Rock City in following years, including an art car styled as the foot of the Buddha.

Another major Black Rock City art car hailed in part from nearby Hong Kong. Gon Kirin, a massive metallic mobile dragon, was conceived and co-produced by artist Teddy Lo, who organized several Ten Principles–based events in Hong Kong that did not pursue official regional status. Hong Kong also served as longtime home base for Jason Swamy, the cofounder of Robot Heart, among the playa’s most popular art cars. Swamy went on to serve as creative director of Wonderfruit, a dance music festival in Thailand heavily influenced by but claiming no affiliation with Burning Man.

Finally, following the Mazu Temple and Desert Guard, which will receive more extensive discussion below, the largest Black Rock City installation with a strong China or Taiwan connection was Tulpa Ashrams, a Tibetan Buddhist–inspired pagoda design with a forty-foot-tall central tower. This 2019 project was conceived, built, and paid for by longtime participants in Beijing’s art and design scene, including One Art Museum. All were first-time participants at Burning Man, and their future involvement remains to be seen.

In sum, Burning Man’s authorized regional events have included the mostly annual Dragon Burn in China and Turtle Burn in Taiwan, as well as a one-off Asia Burner Leadership Summit in 2015. These events were catalyzed by participation in Black Rock City art projects, several of which were devoted to nurturing the global growth of regional event communities. Other area groups have made major artistic contributions to Black Rock City and organized related events that did not pursue authorized regional status. While these events and projects have proliferated, their personnel have also become targets for recruitment by ambitiously commercial ventures. Such ventures are the subject of the following two sections, which chart courses of capital across the Pacific and back again.
Shanzhai Seeds: From China to the Black Rock Desert

The Dream Community’s Mazu Temple heralded a larger wave of investors, speculators, and pioneers from China proper, some of whom saw the Black Rock Desert playa as a place not only to settle but also to reproduce for profit on their own western frontier. Inner Mongolia was among the first destinations imagined by Chinese tech companies and Communist Party cadres as appropriate to conjure their own commercial versions of Burning Man, making Chen Qiufan’s geographical meditation even more prescient. This section will discuss playa-bound commercial projects before turning to their rebounded projections back into China.

In 2013, one of Beijing’s most prominent venture capital firms, Matrix, hired Zanadu, an event production company, to build them a Black Rock City theme camp and document their journey. Zanadu posted promotional videos on Weibo, a Chinese social media site, featuring Matrix executives talking about how they hoped to not only push their personal limits in the desert, but to connect with Facebook and Google staff. Matrix returned in 2016 with an art installation, Eastern Lights. Two years later, as a tenth-anniversary event for the founding of their company, they held a tech and music festival at a Gobi Desert location two hours away from Beijing. At least one attendee remarked on its aesthetic echo of Burning Man:

When people mention Matrix in China, the first word that came up is “Cool”—it organizes CEO trips to exotic places and encourage outdoor and exploration... When the car drove into the desert, I was immersed with huge art installations that remind me of the outer space and Burning Man. Both are set in desert and have a camp area with tents and RVs. The tech forum with Matrix CEOs and the MTA festival feel like SXSW [South by Southwest, the Austin, Texas music and tech festival]. In some way, it is a tech gathering where entrepreneurs and investors fly in to have meetings with other entrepreneurs.  

Matrix’s promotions accelerated a growing wave of expensive package tours that promised, and sometimes delivered, increasingly scarce Black Rock City event tickets and theme camp infrastructure to wealthy Chinese tourists. In 2018, I visited one of the most massive of these camps, China Village, registered by a Houston, Texas–based Chinese travel agent who had marketed his RV rental services on a variety of Chinese-language social media platforms. The village was composed of rows of identical yurts and RVs, with a few shared shade structures. Hung from the top of the largest of these structures was a huge banner announcing the space as a team-building center for Tencent, one of China’s largest tech companies, which owns Wechat, China’s ubiquitous social media app. Tencent’s travel coordinator had prepared a printed Chinese translation of the Black Rock City map, which listed dozens of actual art projects and also included an incorrect map point for electronic music act Daft Punk at the event perimeter known as the “trash fence,” inadvertently reproducing a long-running inside joke meant to mock music celebrity promotion on playa. According to my interview with Tencent’s handler, the organizer of an annual Chinese tech culture festival who had won a competitive bid, the executives flew in for the weekend after spending the week visiting entertainment and tech industry corporate headquarters in San Francisco and Los Angeles. Apart from this corporate group, the other residents of the village had rented their accommodations directly through the agent.

China Village was one of several such commercial camps that formed in the late 2010s. Another, promoted through travel outlet Oceaner, aimed specifically at electronic dance music enthusiasts
and offered an all-in experience led by a social media influencer for 33,000RMB (US$5100) per person. A competing outfit offered a camp that promised business networking: “To join with 80+ leaders of China’s top business schools/investment community members. To enter the world’s first blockchain theme camp, slow down, and listen to your inner voice.” This advertisement was promoted on Wechat and featured co-branding and affiliation with Capital Blockchain Media, Global Blockchain Business Council, China Blockchain Application Center, China Mergers and Acquisitions Association, and the Chinese Museum of Finance.

Joining such theme camps offered—or promised—Chinese participants a chance to expand their business networks in ways that would have been unimaginable back home. As a member of China Village told me over lunch, “There are a bunch of CEOs and founders here. There’s no way I’d be eating with all these people at the same time in China, if ever, or seeing them party so wildly.” Such fusions of the instrumental with the recreational fueled the ambitious dreams of several entrepreneurs to refashion Burning Man’s aesthetic into marketing events in the vast deserts of western China, the fever dream of the next section.

**Shanzhai Boomerangs: From the Black Rock Desert to the Gobi Desert**

The first explicit commercial effort to adapt Burning Man for the Chinese market occurred in 2012 when China Bridge Capital, an investment bank, helped a township in the frontier boomtown of Ordos, Inner Mongolia, reach out to the Burning Man Project to pursue a joint venture. During a meeting with the Shanghai regional contact in Beijing, company and township executives expressed hopes that collaboration with Burning Man would bring celebrities and turn the Ordos township into “a new Dubai.” After plans for a site visit fell through, both sides decided not to pursue any further collaboration.

The next commercial effort nearly materialized in 2016, when Zhu Guofan, a foot-massage franchise founder and outdoor sports enthusiast, incorporated a company, Beijing Black Rock City, and held a press conference to launch an eponymous event, described as “China’s Burning Man,” to be held in the Gobi Desert. Although Zhu’s team had actually been to Black Rock City and released several video travelogues of their experiences, they did not reveal their plans to the Burning Man Project and were unaware of Dragon Burn. After I repeatedly reached out to them about trademark infringement, they decided to retain their corporate name but change the event name to Phoenix Burn (fig. 7). This did little to mollify Dragon Burn organizers, who were nonplussed about possible confusion with their own event but did not pursue any legal remedy for it.

Phoenix Burn commissioned sculptures to adorn their event, including the metal-welded Mongolian warrior, designed by artist Lu Ming and later renamed Desert Guard. Although this pilot event was canceled when the local government denied them a permit, Phoenix Burn later rebranded as the Node 818 Festival and held several events in the desert of Qinghai province, adjacent to Tibet. Although they no longer claimed any affiliation with Burning Man, they did retain a number of familiar elements, including the open clock site layout of Black Rock City.

As mentioned in the introduction, Desert Guard found its way to Black Rock City in 2018 as part of a much more ambitious and government-backed effort spearheaded by Joshua Chen,
a Beijing-based marketing entrepreneur with deep ties to the Chinese Communist Party. Earlier that year, Chen, who had seen imagery of Black Rock City but not yet visited any Burner events, applied to trademark Burning Man under a new holding company, Beijing Burning Man Festival Brand Management Limited. He established "Beijing Burner Club" accounts on several Chinese social media platforms, and then sent an email to the Burning Man Project that included a link to a YouTube video which featured several dozen office workers waving a banner that read, "China Welcomes Burning Man."

After Burning Man Project staff forwarded me the YouTube-linked email solicitation and asked me to investigate further, I got in touch with Chen, who brought me to Beijing and told me of his plans to pursue a joint venture and brand collaboration with Burning Man. The dream was to begin with a bang—a fifteen-thousand-person event, titled Gobi Heaven, was already planned later that year in Inner Mongolia's Gobi Desert. Chen took me to a cavernous warehouse on the outskirts of Beijing which he was using to produce a series of TV commercials with an estimated budget of US$200,000. These included a theme song with a heavily reverbed guitar riff and vaguely Turkic rhythmic elements, growled by an aging rocker who had recorded several minor hits in the 1980s. Chen said that he planned to pump these video ads into every karaoke outlet in the country. The next day, while we visited several of his prospective brand partners, it became clear that Chen had already misrepresented himself and Beijing Burning Man Brand Management as formal partners of the Burning Man Project, and signed multiple commercial contracts with Chinese artists and brands promising to serve as Burning Man’s agent.
A day later, Chen staged a press conference to announce the co-launch of Beijing Burner Club and Gobi Heaven. This included presentations from several advertising consultants about how their event would be akin to Burning Man but more suited for the Chinese market—one proposed slogan was, “Burning Man is about being lost, but Gobi Heaven is about being found.” The atmosphere turned tense and awkward when I reminded the staff that Burning Man Project is a nonprofit organization and therefore was all but certain to not approve a joint business venture. As a peacemaking gesture, I was later presented with a white scarf and a whole roast lamb in a heavily photographed ritual of quasi-Mongolian hospitality.

In the following weeks, Chen abandoned the Beijing Burning Man Brand Management Company and reincorporated his business under the Gobi Heaven brand. However, he continued to promote his event as “China’s Burning Man” to domestic media and business partners. Gobi Heaven’s Wechat channel and several other marketing companies posted videos that used uncredited Black Rock City imagery before cutting to Gobi Heaven promotional graphics. Gobi Heaven soon released their own idiosyncratic and emoji-enhanced set of Ten Principles, such as “No Complaining” and “Put Down Your Cellphone.” Large poster advertisements soon plastered the cinema entrances in Shanghai and other major cities for months.

What Gobi Heaven lacked in formal legitimation from the Burning Man Project, it compensated for with financial backing from deep-pocketed state and private enterprises, including the Chinese partner of Blizzard, the parent company of the World of Warcraft videogame franchise. Powerful and well-resourced state backers included the Ministry of Culture and Tourism; China Cultural Media Group, directly managed by the Ministry; and the Chinese Communist Party–owned investment vehicle, China Capital Group. A leaked slide deck from another state-owned conglomerate, China Merchants Group, among the ten most politically well-connected firms in China, revealed that it planned to support what it called “China’s Burning Man event, Gobi Heaven,” described as “China’s first collective carnival of highly educated people, China’s first collective voice of creatives, and China’s first deep integration of different cultural communities,” by financing business partners to build theme camps or provide art to be placed on an urban design grid that appeared nearly identical to that of Black Rock City. Unlike the original event, which places a premium on “participation” by placing highly interactive theme camps in desirable locations, Gobi Heaven’s vendors could simply pay more for more central placement.

After many permit delays, Gobi Heaven finally held its inaugural event in August 2019. Based on photos, vlog reports, and personal communication from several attendees, it drew several hundred people, mostly paid staff or volunteers. Local media outlets filed reports recounting the names of party officials and state-linked corporate executives who attended the opening ceremony, which included a paid troupe of costumed Mongolian dancers. With attendance lower than expected, door prices dropped precipitously from 2800RMB to 80RMB. Hundreds of area village residents were bused in to populate the event for promotional photo-taking. Despite these hurdles, organizers declared success and announced they would do it again the next year. However, the COVID-19 pandemic put plans for a larger event on indefinite hiatus. In the meantime, as China reopened after its 2020 lockdown, Gobi Heaven launched a new sub-brand, “Theme Camping Party,” and held small-scale glamping events in collaboration with the city governments of Beijing and Kunming and a recreational vehicle company.


17. My translation


Besides Gobi Heaven, there was at least one other, more brazenly shanzhai state-backed commercial knockoff of Burning Man in 2020. Colorful World, the Hunan provincial outlet of the state-owned Windows of the World theme park group, internationally famous for its kitschy scale replicas of the Eiffel Tower, the Taj Mahal, Buckingham Palace, and other monuments, held a nightly Burning Man event for one week in late March. Colorful World’s print and online advertisements featured a photo of a flaming Man effigy above a team of Lamplighters, the Black Rock City volunteer group that lights and raises kerosene lamps in a ritual procession, and announced that for an early-bird entrance price of 49.9 renminbi (US$8), spectators could witness fireworks, a bonfire, and an effigy burn set by Colorful World staff wearing mock Lamplighter costumes, all within walking distance from replicas of Mount Rushmore and the Sydney Opera House. Colorful World did not reach out to Burning Man Project staff or Dragon Burn organizers before holding this event, nor respond to my email queries about their plans. Searches for press reports have so far proven fruitless. With luck and persistence, intrepid scholars of the future may someday be able to acquire eyewitness reports of this extraordinary serial simulacra and save them for posterity.

Conclusion

Mark Fisher’s analysis of “capitalist realism,” with which this article began, goes some way toward anticipating the interplay of authorized and shanzhai manifestations of Burning Man, and its import for global capital. Gobi Heaven, an actually commercial if nominally communist shanzhai enterprise, aimed not only to “repeat older gestures of rebellion and contestation as if for the first time” but to trademark them ahead of the process. In this sense, rather than iterating “the old struggle between detournement and recuperation,” Gobi Heaven embodied what Fisher named the precorporation of subversive materials and potentials, “the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture.” That this precorporation was articulated through the productive forces of the Chinese Communist Party lends it an ironic, if not paradoxical character. Such a turn within China had been noted by historian Karl Gerth, who in 2010 coined a term, state consumerism, “to refer specifically to the wide-ranging efforts within China’s form of state capitalism to manage demand in every respect, from promoting, defining, and even spreading consumption of some things to eliminating, discrediting, or at the very least marginalizing private preferences for the allocation of resources.” This followed an earlier observation that “modern Chinese consumer desire,” whether state-directed or otherwise, “has expanded to the consumption of experiences, such as education, leisure travel, and cultural events such as the Beijing Olympics.” Were his book written but a decade later, he might as well have been talking about Burning Man, at least for the “creative” and “highly educated” strata targeted by Gobi Heaven’s backers.

Mark Fisher’s final piece of writing before his untimely demise in 2017 was the introduction to an unfinished book, “Acid Communism,” intended to reimagine the unrealized political potentials of the 1960s nexus of the psychedelic counterculture and social activism. Drawing heavily from the ideas of Jeremy Gilbert, Fisher argued that it took the “bravura intelligence, ferocious energy and improvisational imagination of the neoliberal counter-revolution” to conjure a new form of “individualism defined against the different forms of collectivity that clamoured out of the
Sixties” of the US and the UK, if not Cultural Revolution-era China. Reaching into the surreal experiments of the past, hoped Fisher, would uncover an antidote to capitalist realism’s grim foreclosure of the future figured by “capitalist realism.”

Burning Man’s own debt to 1960s US culture has been confirmed by no less prominent a participant than Stewart Brand, the organizer of the seminal psychedelic Trips Festival in 1966 and the human at the center of Fred Turner’s account of San Francisco and Silicon Valley’s twinned transition “from counterculture to cyberculture.” As Brand puts it:

Burning Man has realized with such depth and thoroughness and ongoing originality and ability to scale and minimalist rules, but enough rules that you can function, and all the things we were farting around with, [event founder] Larry Harvey has really pulled off. I don’t think that would have come to pass without going through whatever that spectrum of the ’60s was, the prism of the ’60s, the spectrum of bright colors that we espoused for a while. It all got exacerbated by the Internet and sequence of computer-related booms, but I think it flavored a whole lot of the basic nature of Burning Man.

Burning Man’s refraction of the 1960s, like Brand’s own endeavors, can hardly be said to have intensified a revolt against capitalism, even if it did make visible heretofore unimagined possibilities for it. Indeed, by the mid-2010s, Burning Man’s growing significance for US financial and political elites was made clear in the claim of arch-industrialist Elon Musk that “Burning Man IS Silicon Valley,” and the appearance of a Burning Man photobook on Ivanka Trump’s desk noted in the introduction.

The contradictions reached an apotheosis in October 2021, after the second Covid 19–forced cancellation of the ticketed Black Rock City event, when the cash-starved Burning Man Project went so far as to put price tags on the products of its nominally “decommodified” culture when it held a benefit art auction in collaboration with Sotheby’s, one of the dominant dealers of the commercial art world.

All this is to say (perhaps needlessly by now) that well before the materialization of “communist”-backed capital in the form of a metal-clad Mongolian warrior, Burning Man’s successful institutionalization had already undermined its late-1990s boosters’ visions of a guerrilla war against the commodification of culture or the reach of the state. It might be tempting to conclude that such developments signify the failure of Burning Man’s “guerrilla war against alienating spectacle.” Yet, as cogently argued by Graham St John, “While utopic yearnings and dystopian visions have motivated Burners, Burning Man was never a utopia.” Neither, of course, was communist China, but tell that to a commentator at Gobi Heaven’s launch who observed that Burning Man’s principles of “Decommodification” and “Communal Effort” may better approximate a communist society than whatever ideologies are at work in contemporary China. This was an intriguing observation, especially given the commentator’s use of the launch to market his own for-profit Black Rock City camp aimed at Chinese VIPs, an all the more confounding insight when considered alongside the fantasies of influential American political activists, such as Grover Norquist, who celebrate Black Rock City as a libertarian paradise.

Although Gobi Heaven may be among the more spectacular attempts to copycat this ostensibly decommmodified but eminently commercializable community, if nothing else, its efforts alongside Burning Man’s own enterprising sprawl signal the event culture’s value and influence as a global totem of cultural capital. Indeed, such an uneasy coincidence points to the event culture’s consolidation into what literary scholar Lydia Liu calls a translingual “supersign,” a

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“linguistic monstrosity that thrives on the excess of its presumed meanings by virtue of being exposed to, or thrown together with, foreign etymologies and foreign languages.”

Such surreal and confounding monstrosities animated the ironic spaces of FoxCarn and the Betel Store, the interactive factory showroom that satirized Burning Man’s inextricability from global supply chains and exploitation of land and labor, particularly that of China. That project, however dark, was driven by a kernel of hope. Even Mark Fisher at his most dire maintained that peering past the smoke and mirrors of the market can afford “glimmers of alternative political and economic possibilities [that] can have a disproportionately great effect. The tiniest event can tear a hole in the grey curtain of reaction which has marked the horizons of possibility under capitalist realism. From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again.”

Such affects of hope, fear, and possibility continue circulating and mutating far from Black Rock City’s dust storms and social media influencers, where its offspring in China and Taiwan—both official regional events and even its commercial pretenders—continue yielding opportunities to envision and enact yet more surreal and emancipatory versions of the future, capitalist or otherwise.

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