# The cultural governance of China's mass media events: how the PRC manages discourses in complex media environments

Schneider, F.A.; Shei, C.

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## How the PRC manages discourses in complex media environments

*Florian Schneider*

### Introduction

In the People's Republic of China (PRC), politics are today defined not primarily by the coercive forces that the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) can wield to rule the country, but more frequently by the Party's ability to manage political discourses in ways that make it unnecessary to use this arguably substantial capacity for force. The CCP today governs by appealing to citizens to cooperate, by justifying and explaining its rule publicly, and by persuading a broad range of societal actors to participate in the governance of the PRC. A major element in the ruling Party's political toolbox is its ability to manage symbols and shape discourses, and through this 'cultural governance' try to align diverse interests with those of the leadership.

Understanding these complex dynamics of cooperation and negotiation is crucial if we are to make sense of contemporary Chinese politics, which are often portrayed in terms of domination and resistance, and as attempts of the CCP to cement its rule through a combination of state censorship and party propaganda against a contentious populace. In some cases, such a portrayal may indeed be warranted, particularly where interactions through social media create dynamics that seem like a cat-and-mouse game between savvy media users and the authorities. Discursive 'struggle' can provide a useful shorthand for describing a particular dimension of PRC media management, for instance where activism indeed attacks state and party actions, like in the aftermath of the Wenzhou high-speed rail crash and its attempted cover-up (Bondes and Schucher, 2014), in cases where internet users join together to uncover acts of public malfeasance (Herold, 2011), or during high-profile protests against the kind of media events that this chapter discusses. However, such struggles over who controls discourses and their means of production are not the norm, and privileging such stories of backlash against the authorities risks obscuring the degree of public-private collaboration that characterizes the PRC's cultural governance approach.

A watershed moment of this approach has been the series of media events that the Hu Jintao administration organized during its tenure, most notably the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and the 2010 Shanghai World Exposition. These high-profile media events showcased what China's role in the world should be, and they provided the stakeholders with the opportunity

to recalibrate the various political discourses associated with the perceived revival of China as a Great Power. As such, these events provide an excellent lens through which to examine how the Hu Jintao administration thought about culture at the time, but also how Chinese officials try to manage discourses about China more generally.

To highlight some of the complexities that characterized discourse management during the Beijing Olympics and the Shanghai Expo, this chapter will first discuss the CCP's cultural governance strategy, focusing in particular on attempts to augment traditional, top-down modes of propaganda and censorship with more liberal components that outsource regulatory activities to private actors. I will make the case that such activities should best be viewed as networked politics (Castells, 2009), in which diverse actors use their power within networks to 'switch' themselves and others into communication processes and 'programme' the discourses that then proliferate through the networks. To illustrate these activities, the chapter will analyze how the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony was created and broadcasted, and what went into designing the Shanghai Expo territory and its pavilions. Finally, the chapter examines how various non-official actors recalibrate the main discourses of such events to suit their diverse purposes. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how the mass media events of the 2000s relate to more recent media management in the PRC, and what the legacy of such events can tell us about the cultural governance approach under Xi Jinping's leadership.

## The importance of media management in China and the PRC's approach to cultural governance

The CCP has long considered it its responsibility to reform Chinese society and legitimate its role as China's vanguard by governing political discourses. Under Mao's rule, these activities fell under the broad banner of 'thought work', but even after the PRC opened its doors and started its process of reforms, and especially after the tumultuous events of 1989, the Party's attempts to shape public perceptions remained a cornerstone of its agenda. As Brady (2008: 1) has pointed out, 'in the post-1989 period, propaganda and thought work have become the very life blood (. .) of the Party-State'. In the post-Mao era, the idea that the leadership should 'guide public opinion' has become a core belief behind the Party's sprawling propaganda system (see Shambaugh, 2007), which has creatively adapted its modus operandi to the challenges of a market-driven information age. To this end, the CCP has largely abandoned the totalitarian ambitions that Mao outlined in his famous Yan'an speech on cultural management (Mao, 1942), even though it retains many of the moralist assumptions that informed earlier ideological work. Today's cultural management in China embraces an approach that cleverly combines top-down hierarchical decrees and advanced censorship techniques with softer, more indirect management methods.

I have discussed this 'cultural governance' approach in detail elsewhere (Schneider, 2016), adapting the term from Michael Shapiro (2004) and William Callahan (2006) to refer to regulatory activities that attempt to govern society by adjusting the cultural parameters in which politics take place. I will not rehearse all the details here, but three core elements are worth briefly highlighting: the importance of market liberalization, the use of indirect regulatory mechanisms, and the role that non-state actors play in cultural production.

Firstly, the introduction of capitalist market principles to the PRC economy has radically changed how China's media work today. In the wake of the general economic reforms, the PRC also opened up the state-dominated media industries to market forces, introducing modern management principles and a profit-oriented rationale. The resulting economic success has created an ongoing challenge for media organizations to balance the bottom line with the Party's

political directives (see Zhao, 1998). While market incentives have created a highly diverse media and cultural environment, especially where topics such as sports, fashion, or lifestyle are concerned, it would be misleading to assume that market liberalization had reduced the CCP's ability to manage discourses in contemporary China.

The Party retains control of the media through a number of indirect mechanisms and incentives, and this is the second element of its cultural governance that deserves attention here. These indirect controls include the numerous strategies through which the CCP remains in charge of state agencies like news conglomerates, TV stations, museums, or major production studies (see Lieberthal, 2003: ch.7). Personnel management plays a particularly important role in this regard. The Party's cultural governance further includes a sophisticated state licensing system that allows only approved non-state actors to create and sell cultural content with mass appeal, and the state maintains numerous regulatory agencies that can allow or ban certain types of content in particular segments of the market. In this way, the Party, through the state, defines for example what can be aired during the lucrative prime-time period on Chinese television; such decisions then filter through the market to private cultural producers who have to conform to political imperatives if they hope to make a profit with their products. One could say that the Party has revamped its media control by augmenting the substantial power of the state with the complex transmission mechanisms that market interactions create. In this way, the CCP's technics of control have become more obscure, though this should not detract from the fact that these controls create significant pressures on private actors to produce and disseminating politically acceptable discourses.

The third important component to the PRC's cultural governance is the willingness to outsource processes of cultural meaning-making to non-official actors. This means soliciting the expertise of private production companies, public relations (PR) firms and advertisers, information technology (IT) experts, etc. It also means giving the consumers of media more leeway to make sense of the rich, diverse cultural environment they face, and to provide sanctioned (and carefully monitored) spaces for peer-to-peer discussion, for instance through private social media corporations like Tencent or Sina. By setting the rules of interactions at a macro level, the leadership is able to outline what is or is not acceptable discourse once sets of symbols proliferate through this multitude of relatively open channels. By negotiating and reasoning with media producers, consumers, and users, the leadership is generally able to create a consensus between diverse actors as to what media management in China should achieve. Where actors remain unconvinced, selective draconian measures against companies and individuals inspire self-censorship and prevent media workers and consumers from pushing the boundaries of the permissible too far (Hassid, 2008). In this way, the CCP delegates the responsibility for media control to societal actors. In some cases, these actors may willingly adopt this role, for instance where the CCP has convinced actors to share its concerns about perceived amoral behavior such as so-called online rumormongering. In other cases, where actors may not share the CCP's vision, they are confronted with the strong constraints of moral discourse, economic incentives (such as, in the case of media workers, the possibility of being fired), and the risk of being isolated from important social interactions should they not play their assigned roles as keepers of moral rectitude.

The CCP understands that political decision-making rests to no small degree on the capacity of various actors to interpret political, cultural, social, and economic concepts, and that these interpretations in turn shape the legitimacy of the political process as a whole, which 'largely relies on consent elicited by the construction of shared meaning', to use Castells' words (2009: 12). Through its control of government agencies and its ability to inspire collaboration among non-state actors, the leadership continues to exert control over the meanings of cultural artifacts, and through these artifacts manages political discourses.

Following Castells, we might think of the CCP's cultural governance activities as then falling into two categories: *switching* and *programming* activities. In complex communication networks like those that the CCP attempts to manage, power rests with actors that are able to link different areas of society together, for instance by connecting media networks, trade networks, financial networks, logistical networks, and security networks. These actors are then able to infuse the networks with their own values, meanings, and interpretations. *Switching* refers to actions that connect or separate networks and their actors (Castells, 2009: 46–47), whereas *programming* is the 'the ability to generate, diffuse, and affect the discourses that frame human action' (ibid.: 53) through such networks. The reason that Castells' metaphor of a networked society and his conceptions of switching and programming are useful in this context is that they highlight how the nature of power shifts in neoliberal governance contexts such as the ones over which the CCP presides (even as these shifts may not necessarily benefit the much-evoked networked public). Indeed, the two strategies of switching and programming are very much evident in how the Hu Jintao administration organized media events like the Beijing Olympics and the Shanghai Expo in the late 2000s.

## Switching actors into the networks of China's media event production

China's media events are good examples of how Party and state agencies make use of their switching power, strategically delegating responsibilities and collaborating with non-state actors in order to manage a complex, dynamic media environment. Take the example of the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony, which took place on 8 August 2008 and was designed to present China's re-emergence as a Great Power to audiences both at home and abroad. The opening ceremony was a large-scale collaborative public relations effort that was initiated, coordinated, and executed by the Chinese state, but which involved input from a variety of actors, ranging from diverse state agencies and CCP organs to private agents.[1]

The authorities planned the event for over four years, spending several 100 million RMB in the process. Under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture, the 'Opening-Closing Ceremony Department' (奥組委開閉幕式工作部) managed the cultural activities associated with the games. The task of this team of 30 to 40 people was to oversee various working groups (production, public relations, etc.) and later coordinated the event with other state actors, such as the municipal police department and the transit authorities. The core unit within this department that designed, planned, and executed the actual ceremony was the 'Opening-Closing Ceremony Command Center' (開閉幕式運營中心). During peak times, it employed up to 800 individuals. The members of this center refined the ceremony, developed the various acts, and 'field-tested' the opening ceremony as well as various Beijing Olympics cultural products.

The ceremony itself was performed for different groups of critics, including film directors such as Chen Kaige and Ang Lee, a group of Chinese citizens from all walks of life, and the responsible CCP Leadership Small Group under the direction of a then rising political star, Xi Jinping. Once approved, the final performance was prepared for telecasting by Beijing Olympic Broadcasting (BOB), a joint-venture between the Chinese side (the official Beijing Olympics Committee for the Olympic Games, or BOCOG) and the Olympic Broadcasting Service of the International Olympic Committee (see also Brownell, 2008: 186). It used new broadcasting technologies that had themselves required various levels of negotiation and compromise to implement, for instance between creative and technical personnel (see Liang, 2013).

Domestically, the visual discourse of the event, with all its possible interpretations, was disambiguated for viewers by China Central Television (CCTV) and its two commentators, who

framed the visuals with carefully rehearsed statements that were likely scripted in advance and meticulously rehearsed: the phrases relay the official propaganda discourse without any random colloquialisms, and the intonation of the speakers also closely resembles that of actors offering official speeches or performing in socialist-realist theater. The result was a series of official propaganda statements that left little doubt about how the proceedings were meant to be interpreted.

The Beijing Olympics opening ceremony illustrates how the CCP recruits various stakeholders to create a spectacle. In the case of the opening ceremony, the result was a well-rehearsed representation of the administration's agenda to create a 'harmonious society', fusing traditional Chinese cultural symbols with images of a young and joyous China. I will return to the seemingly hegemonic narrative that the event relayed below, but it should be stressed that regardless of how we interpret the opening ceremony, the final cultural product was the result of complex negotiations in which no single actor dictated the discourses top-down. Instead, the CCP provided the general guideposts within which state and private actors then collaborated to stage discourses that struck all participants as acceptable, possibly even as convincing, and ultimately as a common-sense representation of contemporary China on the world stage.

A similar collaboration took place at the site of the Shanghai World Exposition two years later, though this collaboration included an even more diverse range of actors, foreign and domestic, who had to construct their public discourses within overlapping institutional frameworks.[2] Most notably, this included organizers of national, corporate, and city pavilions, each comprising teams of core event managers, PR professionals, and political protocol officers, and later involving an array of logistics experts, architects, engineers, artists, and film directors. In many cases, the work of these teams started as early as four years before the actual event, drawing on a combination of public and private funding in the range of 30 to 60 million Euros per pavilion. Throughout the Expo preparations, each team would negotiate the political and commercial interests that fueled their pavilion project at home, for instance accommodating funding cuts in the wake of the financial crisis or integrating the PR directives of specific government administrations into their pavilion plans. The pavilions also needed to conform to the general guidelines of the Bureau of International Exhibition (BIE), headquartered in Paris, and ultimately to the national and provincial regulations in China, coordinated and implemented by the Bureau of Shanghai World Expo Coordination (or *Shiboju*世博局), a temporary institution composed of staff from various public security and logistics agencies in China as well as foreign affairs and media workers under the auspice of the CCP. When the Shanghai Expo opened its doors to the public on 1 May 2010, between 200 and 800 different people had been involved in designing, constructing, and administrating each major Expo pavilion.

Importantly, the Shanghai Expo illustrates how the Chinese state and the Party manage complex cultural processes by taking an indirect approach and providing general rules of cultural production rather than attempting to regulate systems of meanings directly. While all Expo exhibitions were checked in early 2010 by a Shiboju delegation to assure that no politically sensitive topics were on display (e.g. references to the political status of Taiwan or Tibet), there were, to my knowledge, no major conflicts between the censors and the respective pavilion teams over the content of the exhibits. The pavilion staffers and organizers I interviewed in 2010 were overwhelmingly positive about their interactions with the Chinese organizers and had not encountered any overt criticism of their presentations, though it should be pointed out that many had no intentions of constructing controversial displays in the first place. To most exhibitors, the need for easily digestible public diplomacy outweighed any potential agenda to challenge visitors' world views, which in turn assured that their efforts remained firmly located within the greater narratives of the Expo event. Yet even organizers who had intentionally

created more provocative content noted that the Shanghai organizers were overall accommodating, finding for example no fault with didactically challenging exhibits. The organizers of the Spanish pavilion, for instance, provided an avant-gardist deconstruction of tradition and modernity through their exhibits that clashed with the linear modernity narratives on display at the official China pavilion. They also dressed their staff in uniforms that were purposefully designed to challenge any glorification of military insignia, which the organizers believed was a feature of CCP rule and which they meant to criticize. In other cases, such as in some of the official theme pavilions, the Chinese and international organizers decided to display critiques of modernity that stood in stark contrast to the PRC's often celebratory discourses about urbanism and progress; these exhibits for instance showcased artworks that equated modern cityscapes with garbage or presented dystopian visions of environmental degradation.

It is an open question why the authorities allowed these critics to prevail. The censors may not have understood the thrust of the argument. They may have concluded that visitors would not be swayed by the often abstract, artistic representations or they may have decided that letting some critics have their way would serve as an example of CCP benevolence and inclusiveness. Whatever the motivations, the Chinese administrators effectively provided the space for discursive construction and then watched that construction unfold. They could ultimately remain content in the knowledge that the various overlapping interests and institutional constraints would generate a core narrative of a prosperous and urban China.

## Programming the official discourse

At the Olympic Games and the Expo, Chinese authorities brought together a set of stakeholders who would collaboratively tell the story of a rejuvenated China to audiences at home and abroad. Through their switching activities, the authorities positioned themselves and their collaborators within communication networks in ways that would then make it possible to program the networks with approved discourses. In many ways, this cultural governance approach was effective at promoting stories of a benevolent and harmonious China, at least with certain audiences.

The example of how the 2008 Olympic Games opening ceremony was broadcast around the world illustrates this effectiveness among an important target audience of PRC soft power campaigns: foreign media gatekeepers. As I have mentioned above, BOB provided the official images for the event, both at home and for most foreign broadcasters (the exception was the American broadcaster NBC, which had been permitted to film its own footage). The official images thus framed the event and its visual discourses for most viewers, at times also providing digitally altered footage, e.g. of the fireworks, to assure that the visual spectacle would truly be relayed on TV as intended.

In the run-up to the Olympic Games, foreign audiences had received very different media exposure compared to domestic spectators, and these foreign audiences were not hearing the officially designed explanation of what they were witnessing. Instead, they had been exposed to a barrage of bad press and had been continuously reminded of the many human rights issues that remained unresolved in the PRC (see the contributions in Worden, 2008). They now tuned in to their domestic stations, which each offered its own commentary on the event. My interviews with the creators of the opening ceremony showed that the team was well aware of the challenges that negative press abroad posed to their PR strategy (interview in Beijing, August 2009). To prevent a misinterpretation of the intended meanings, the organizers took several measures, targeted specifically at foreign journalists.

Firstly, as mentioned above, BOB provided the official images that foreign broadcasters would use in their reporting. The reporters on e.g. British, French, German, Japanese or Taiwanese TV thus narrated a visual arrangement that Chinese media workers had edited. Secondly, in an attempt to indirectly frame what foreign journalists would later report to their respective audiences, the Beijing Olympics organizing committee prepared previews for selected reporters, held press conferences, and distributed special media guides and press materials such as the 32 editions of the Beijing Olympics News Paper. The effect was that the entire event had been carefully 'programmed' with a specific PR message that portrayed China as a hypermodern, civilized, and peace-loving partner in world affairs.

This strategy of collaborating with the media gatekeepers outside of the mainland appears to have been relatively successful. My own examination of the German TV broadcast, as well as my analysis of Taiwanese broadcasts, each suggest that reporters abandoned their initial critical commentary about e.g. the protests that had accompanied the torch relay. Instead, they connected the visuals they were presenting to discourses about the harmonious nature of Chinese civilization. These narrations, combined with footage of enthusiastic athletes on the ground, lent this positive discourse a sense of genuineness that the CCP would have been unlikely to achieve through conventional propaganda techniques (public-service announcements, slogans, posters, etc.).

At the Olympics, the core strategy for programming discourses was to provide a repertoire of readily available discursive building blocks and symbols that other actors would re-work in line with the guiding logic of these semiotic systems. This mainly happened through press materials and peer-to-peer collaboration between information gatekeepers such as journalists, and a similar rationale also informed the cultural governance strategy two years later, at the Shanghai Expo, where the Expo media center designed much of the materials that would go out to reporters.

More importantly, the Expo also relayed its discourses through the architecture and geographical arrangements at the site, and the organizers made use of their ability to shape the rules according to which this would happen. Creatively working within the international regulations of the BIE, the local organizers clustered pavilions together according to geopolitical regions, creating the impression that walking across the Expo territory in Pudong was indeed like traveling the world (see also my discussion in Schneider, 2014). While the individual pavilion organizers could choose construction lots on a first-come first-serve basis, introducing a level of randomness to the geographical set up, the idiosyncratic outcome nevertheless prompted some observers to comment that the geopolitical meanings of expo territory were 'sometimes comically obvious', with for example the US and Japanese pavilions 'exiled to the far ends of the Expo site, as far from the China pavilion as physically possible' (Minter, 2010).

Much of this geographical arrangement may have been coincidental, but the effect was nonetheless a sense that nation-states are the most important political actor in our world, and that their geographical location in that world matters. It is before this backdrop that the intentional design choices at the expo territory unfold their discursive potentials, for example in the case of the official China Pavilion, which was located at the center of the Expo territory, on an elevated plateau, in direct proximity to the Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan pavilions (the latter separated from the 'mainland' by one of the major Expo thruways, which doubled as an imaginary Taiwan Strait). It is easy to see why such outcomes appear to cement a hegemonic grand narrative about China's place in the world, but it is important to remember that the true elegance of the Shanghai Expo's cultural governance approach was to offer diverse stakeholders readily available semiotic resources for the construction of discourses, and to then be tolerant towards the diversity that this created.

## Re-calibrating the discourses of China's media events

The results of Chinese cultural governance during the Beijing Olympics and the Shanghai Expo were two impressive media events with ostensibly consistent overarching narratives. In each event, China emerged as a prosperous and civilized Great Power at the center of a multi-polar, harmonious world order. Numerous scholars have pointed out how coherent, even dominant, this narrative became during each event. To Barmé (2009: 85), the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony represented a 'flat and self-congratulatory Chinese history' with a fairly unified discourse that deployed nationalist symbols and discourses of revival. Callahan (2012) as well as Nordin (2012) have each argued that the Shanghai Expo ultimately collapsed into a Chinese vision of capitalist modernity.

That such impressions would emerge from these two events demonstrates how, in the eyes of critical observers, cultural expressions can contribute to seemingly hegemonic discourses. That said, neither event easily collapses into a grand narrative. I would argue that this was intentional. As mentioned above, the core themed pavilions of the Shanghai Expo frequently questioned simple understandings of capitalist modernity, providing discourses on environmentally sustainable urban life that were decidedly postmodern and often avant-garde (see also Schneider, 2013). These alternative presentations of what a 'better city' and 'better life' would entail, sat uneasily with the messages that exhibits at the central China Pavilion relayed, and yet each was made possible by the cultural governance paradigm that the authorities put into practice at the event.

The official exhibits already created fragmented discourses full of ambiguities, but once we turn to the full range of messages that the various national pavilions constructed, arguments about a hegemonic discourse quickly clash with the impression that diverse actors were each programming the complex networked discourses of the event according to their own values. Take the example of the US pavilion. At first sight, the films and exhibits on display at the US site reproduced similar discourses as those found elsewhere at the event: the privately funded pavilion was steeped in praise for the progressive potential of capitalism. Much like other foreign pavilions, it also catered specifically to Chinese audiences, squarely placing China's growing relevance in international affairs at the center of its rhetoric.

Upon entering the pavilion, visitors were welcomed by a comical video of random Americans trying to greet the audience in Chinese, some failing spectacularly, others succeeding admirably, but all clearly demonstrating that Americans take China seriously. Another video showcased American science and creativity, using a combination of ethnically diverse children and professional talking heads to make a case for sustainable development. The set-piece also included appearances by former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and President Barack Obama, each addressing the audience with 'ni hao' before relaying the US pavilion's PR messages. The following is a segment from Obama's speech:

> '. . . we are proud to showcase the spirit that has always defined us as Americans; a nation of immigrants from all corners of the world, working together with a sense of community and common purpose to overcome adversity, and a sense of possibility and optimism that the future is what we make it, that we can build a better life for our children. Of course, these are not simply American qualities, as I said when I visited Shanghai last year. We are bound by our common humanity, and our shared curiosity.'

This short discourse fragment exemplifies the message of the US pavilion as a whole. It presents a decidedly liberal discourse on America, grounded in nationalist claims about the United States'

ancestral past that are presented as self-evident. The ingenuity of the discourse lies in its presentation of a liberal American way of life as universally shared; note how the speech presents liberal values to Chinese visitors by suggesting that they form a common ground in Sino-American transnational relations. Indeed, the final exhibits in the pavilion were similarly themed this way, for instance tracing the history of Chinese people in America. One exhibit showed American citizens with typical Chinese names, evoking the 'old one-hundred names' (*laobaixing*老百姓) that could also be found in the US. Another commercial exhibit channeled Chinese calligraphy to showcase American appreciation of Chinese high-brow culture. And yet, these implied commonalities were used as a vehicle for an individualist discourse that was diametrically opposed to the often nationalist and communitarian messages on display at the official China Pavilion just down the road. The US Pavilion organizers were effectively linking up with Chinese Expo audiences to then try and program the Expo's networks of meaning with their own discourse.

The US pavilion was an attempt to recalibrate the meaning of China in the world and to emphasize transnational collaboration on American terms. The entire venue and all of its content had been designed for the purpose of turning democratic US values into universal common-sense truths. Not all discursive engagements that took place within these cultural governance activities were this political or were delivered this strategically. Nevertheless, many engaged in attempts to program communicative networks with their own meanings.

For instance, the Beijing Olympics were accompanied by an array of commercial advertising that drew on the semiotic resources supplied by the Chinese Olympic discourse. Some of these offers neatly aligned with official messages, for instance the Coca Cola commercials that aired at the time. One commercial pitches basketball stars LeBron James and Yao Ming against each other in a comic duel of nations, each respectively drawing support from a host of stereotypical cultural symbols from America (cowboys, eagles) and China (dragons, pandas), only to find that, despite all apparent differences, both players share a love for Coca Cola. The commercial ends with the players exchanging Coca Cola bottles and toasting to each other in the other person's native language.

Another Coca Cola commercial depicted comic birds from all around the globe, each performing various athletic feats with Coca Cola straws as they make their way to Beijing. In the end, the birds build a bird's nest out of the straws that resembles the National 'Bird's Nest' Stadium in China's capital, and they settle into their nest to watch the fireworks in the actual stadium below. Such commercial contributions to the discourse arguably offer the best PR the organizers could hope for: technically sophisticated and cleverly designed, these privately produced cultural products provide foreign support for the official Chinese narrative, lending legitimacy to the discourse (see also Brady 2009).

However, whereas the Coca Cola cases illustrate how transnational actors redeploy readily available sets of signs in ways that reinforce the official discourse, other actors used similar core symbols to try and re-program the meanings surrounding the event. Organizations like Amnesty International or Reporters Without Borders, for instance, used the Olympic rings, the Olympic torch, and various ostensibly Chinese cultural symbols to frame the 2008 event as a repressive attack on human rights. Such attempts to infuse the discourse with human rights values illustrates that neoliberal cultural governance also enables actors who push against the overarching discourse to 'switch' themselves into near-global communication processes and program their own meanings into the discursive mix of the media event.

## Conclusion: the legacy of China's media event governance

This chapter examined the media management and cultural governance in the PRC through the lens of the two most prominent international media events that took place in China under

the leadership of Hu Jintao's administration: the Beijing Olympics and the Shanghai Expo. It illustrated how multiple stakeholders came together during these important media events to create and distribute discourses under the guidance of the CCP propaganda system, but without this system regulating cultural meanings top-down.

Overall, the authorities took a neoliberal approach to managing discourses at the two events, using overlapping legal frameworks, soft regulatory measures, and market incentives to switch themselves and other actors into networks of cultural production, and to program those networks with the desired discourses. In cases where these measures indeed caused discourses to align, this was frequently because various stakeholders chose to collaborate, or at least decided that refusal to collaborate would be commercially or diplomatically inopportune, which created a minimal consensus of meanings that was then relayed through transnational networks to diverse audiences. This outcome was owed to the fact that the CCP had utilized its position at the center of discursive networks to infuse communication processes with shared values and readily available, convenient semiotic systems that participants could redeploy as they developed their respective discursive interventions.

This is not to say that media event organizers in China were able to program transnational networks with a coherent discourse. Indeed, I would argue that the overall achievement of these events was not solely to establish a discourse of China's revival as a Great Power, even as numerous actors attempted to construct precisely such an impression. Another achievement was to present China as a diverse society that could tolerate ambiguities over meanings and diversity of opinions.

What, then, are the lasting legacies of the cultural governance approach that the Hu Jintao administration adopted, and that was visible at the mass media events staged during Hu's tenure? We should recall that the ceremony was in fact planned by a Leadership Small Group under Xi Jinping's leadership, though Xi's own approach to media and culture has arguably taken a somewhat ambiguous turn since he ascended to the position of CCP general secretary and head of state in 2012/2013. Under Xi, the CCP has on the one hand indeed continued and even updated many of its previously successful cultural production practices, for instance by encouraging diverse actors to create viral internet content reminiscent of Japan's 'cute' and 'cool' public relations efforts. Examples are YouTube animation videos that compare politics in China, the US, and the UK, or that explain the 13th Five-Year-Plan to foreign audiences.[3] On the other hand, Xi's administration has also reined in dissenters and tightened media control, and Xi has re-affirmed that the media should serve first and foremost as the CCP's mouthpiece (The Guardian, 2016). Online discussion has been heavily curtailed under Xi, and the toughened internet and social media restrictions suggest that the PRC's 'soft' approach to discursive management has taken a draconian turn towards 'hard' measures, at least where the leadership fears that the country's national sovereignty and identity may be at stake.

It is difficult to assess what precisely drives these attempts to re-assert a more classic 'governing' model rather than the more liberal 'governance' approach to culture. It may be that the CCP is still shell-shocked from the events of the so-called Arab Spring and is trying to prevent a potential 'Jasmine Revolution'. It is also possible that more severe measures are tied to internal conflicts within the CCP over the direction of the Party's politics, and that they need to be contextualized within recent anti-corruption campaigns. I would argue that while the CCP has indeed drawn more heavily from the toolbox of top-down governing strategies under Xi, it has done so in juxtaposition with cultural governance techniques that were developed and perfected under the previous administration, and that these strategies are visible in many of today's digital cultural spheres, where actors come together to collaboratively construct meanings within the parameters that the CCP has set. Overemphasizing hard political controls and

antagonistic struggles between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses risks obscuring the many continuities that characterize discursive management in China over the past few decades, and the many channels through which the authorities invite, persuade, or co-opt societal actors to contribute, for better or worse, to their vision of 21st century China.

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## Notes

1 For more background information see the various contributions in Price & Dayan (2008) and the 2009 special issue of *The China Quarterly* (no.197). The following overview is based on the Opening Ceremony Media Guide (BOCOG 2008a) and the official Opening Ceremony Programme (BOCOG 2008b), as well as on interviews with creative personnel involved in planning the opening ceremony.
2 The following accounts of the Expo are based on fieldwork at the site and on interviews conducted with pavilion organizers and staffers throughout July 2010. A more detailed account is available in Schneider (2014).
3 At the time of writing, the videos were available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5a_r1UbPkc and www.youtube.com/watch?v=BHL-0N07rxo, respectively (accessed 27 May 2017).

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