

1 Introduction: Making Sense of China's Spectacles

It is 2009, a year after the Beijing Olympics, and I have made my way across northern Beijing, past one of the massive ring-roads, to a large block of office buildings that sits not too far from the Olympic axis — a long stretch of asphalt, greenery, and event buildings that cuts across the city in an extension of the old north-south connection that the Forbidden City forms with its gates. New construction sites are again blossoming around the area, only a year after much of the city was remodelled to host the mega event. Three new metro lines were constructed in the run-up to the games. More will follow.

I am looking down from an office window at the traffic jam below, people milling across overpasses in the blazing heat. The passers-by are not yet wearing particle masks. The full scale of Beijing's pollution has not made it into the public conscience in 2009. While I am sipping a cold soft drink, one of the organisers of the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony shows me images from the event's press book. She flips to a picture of actors representing Confucian scholars, accompanied by an explanation of the quotation they recite: 'all those within the four seas can be considered his brother'. Another picture shows the huge painting scroll that displayed examples of pre-modern Chinese ingenuity like paper, pottery, and bronze casting.

'Our goal was to brand the Chinese nation', says my host. 'We had two keywords that we were going to showcase: harmony and civilisation'. I turn to the page that shows serene martial artists in white attire performing the elegant movements of Taijiquan below the large digital canvas that circled around the top of the stadium, where animations cascade downwards like a waterfall, in reference to a famous poem by Li Bai. Another page shows the stadium at a distance as fireworks form smiley faces in the sky above.

'Many people abroad felt the Beijing Olympics were controversial', I point out. The torch relay had been accompanied by protests, by calls to

boycott the Games. Then Chinese students abroad responded with their own protests, meant to defend the event. The confrontations between the two protest groups quickly turned the public relations campaign into a security exercise. How did people perceive those conflicts here, I ask. She explains that these negative reactions came as a shock to many. Thousands of people had volunteered. They were hoping to show visitors their home and what China had become. 'Of course they were disappointed about the criticism. In their view, all they had wanted to do was throw the world a giant party'.

The Beijing Games were a source of major pride in China's capital, and generally for people across the country. It is easy to see why. Chinese society had undergone massive transformations over the preceding decades, and the event marked a high-point in economic and political developments in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Official slogans about China's 'hundred-year old Olympic Dream' resonated with many Chinese citizens, especially since such phrases evoked images of an earlier China that had violently and disruptively modernised amidst wars and foreign colonial interventions. Now, in the 21st century, past national struggles and humiliations had finally led to a moment of national rejuvenation and international recognition. China was finally hosting the Olympic Games, an event that epitomised modern internationalism. When the fireworks lit up Beijing's night sky on the auspicious day of 8 August 2008, at eight o'clock, it marked for many a watershed moment in modern Chinese history. China had returned to the world stage.

As students of the Olympic Movement have pointed out, the Games were never just about sports. From the first modern Olympic Games in Athens in 1896 to the present day, the Olympic Spirit has been loaded with political meanings, and it has been used extensively as a public diplomacy tool (Cull 2008: 120-128). The Olympic Games in Beijing were special in that they were hosted by a state that some academics argue exerts a comprehensive 'control of symbols' (Price 2008: 11), or at least tries to do so. Indeed, the Beijing Olympics fit into a larger state-led strategy that involved numerous high-profile events along with media coverage that utilised advanced 21st-century information and communication technologies (ICTs). The PRC leadership had developed a new and improved public relations approach (see Brady 2008). In the eyes of China's propaganda experts, China's increasing economic, political, and cultural relevance in the world needed to be matched with a communication strategy that would alleviate suspicions about a potential

'China Threat' while simultaneously showcasing the leadership's policies to a domestic audience.

Large-scale staged spectacles have been a corner stone of this communication strategy. Aside from the Beijing Olympics in 2008, the PRC government also organised a massive parade to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the PRC in 2009 and a six-month World Exposition in Shanghai in 2010, spending billions of RMB in the process. Each of these endeavours has been hailed by China's state media as the grandest and most impressive event of its kind. In the propaganda of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), these events remain crucial markers of China's domestic and international success. Later spectacles would follow this template. Examples include the 2010 Asian Games in Guangzhou, the 90th anniversary of the CCP in 2011, the G20 summit in Hangzhou in 2016, and the 20th anniversary of Hong Kong's return to the PRC in 2017, but also the recent tradition of holding parades on 3 September, which the state designated a national holiday in 2015 in order to commemorate the end of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). Then there is the ongoing Olympic dream, extended to yet another occasion: at the time of writing, the city of Beijing was preparing to host the 2022 Winter Olympic Games.

This book explores the politics of China's staged spectacles, especially those that the PRC organised between 2008 and 2010 under the leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao (i.e. during the 'Hu-Wen administration'). It examines various attempts to showcase a modern China through large-scale, mediated mass events, and it asks how different actors position themselves during such events to intervene in public discourses and experiment with mechanisms of networked governance. Throughout this book, I refer to such events as 'networked spectacles', and in this introduction I spell out the core theoretical considerations that drive my study of these events. I also discuss the practical implications of my conceptual arguments, laying out the materials I have used and the methods I have deployed to analyse China's networked spectacles. The chapter ends with an overview of the book and its main arguments. First, however, allow me to examine how others have made sense of China's most prominent staged spectacles.

1.1 Why China's staged spectacles matter

China's high-profile spectacles have generated no small amount of controversy. Observers outside China have at times voiced harsh criticism of such events, arguing that the Chinese authorities are manipulating public opinion to obscure their political agenda at home and abroad. In reference to the PRC's relationship with the Sudanese government, US critics christened the 2008 Beijing Summer Games the 'Genocide Olympics' (Farrow & Farrow 2007). Others called for boycotts to highlight deficiencies in the PRC's human rights record (see the various contributions in Worden 2008 for examples and discussions).

The PRC anniversary that took place a year later became an even stronger focal point of foreign criticism, with many journalists seeing the large-scale military parade that rolled across Tiananmen Square as evidence that China was returning to its Maoist past. The *Financial Times* interpreted the event as harking back to 'Mao, Marx and the Military' (Dyer & Anderlini 2009). The German news magazine *Spiegel Online* (Lorenz 2009), reminded of parades in North Korea, argued that 'this was not the modern China, whose functionaries wear Armani suits and invest in international hedge funds. This was a deeply conservative China ...'. The BBC (2009) quipped that China was 'holding itself a Party... a Communist Party'.

When the Shanghai World Exposition opened its gates to visitors in 2010, the anxieties continued: the large, red China Pavilion quickly became a symbol for the perceived new assertiveness of the Chinese government. Foreign observers pointed out that the 'massive structure ... looms, coolly, over the entire site' and 'practically hangs over the Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan pavilions' (Minter 2010). The design, size, and location of the pavilion even led some to view it as evidence that the leadership was expecting the whole world to pay 'tribute to the emperor' (Master 2010).

While foreign news reports interpreted the events primarily through the lens of authoritarian politics and Maoist clichés, scholarship on China has tried to add more nuance, though academic studies have also at times criticised China's mass spectacles for presenting simplistic and potentially manipulative narratives. Barmé (2008: 86), for instance, concludes his discussion of the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony and its presentation of China with the assessment that the event presented 'a flattened vista of its own history'. Brady (2009: 6) compares the Beijing

Olympics to a magician's sleight of hand and interprets the event as part of a larger campaign of 'mass distraction', an attempt to use economic growth and mass entertainment to gloss over domestic problems; a modern-day version of the infamous Roman imperial practice of providing the subjugated masses with bread and games.

Interpretations of the Shanghai Expo have also at times been severe, with William Callahan (2012: 257) criticising the various participants for creating 'a stable harmonious utopia that combines global capitalism and Chinese civilisation', and for reproducing racist and sexist themes. Similarly, Nordin (2012a: 246) asserts that at the expo 'there is only one Future, and it does not welcome contestation'. Both Callahan and Nordin acknowledge that Shanghai also contained counter-stories to the perceived monolithic narrative of the expo, but they see these stories taking place elsewhere, for instance in the discussions of intellectuals, in the arts, or in the interpretations of critically-minded expo visitors, not at the event site itself.

These accounts draw attention to the many ways in which staged spectacles in the PRC deploy advanced public relations techniques as means of persuasion, if not manipulation, and they remind us that such events frequently construct problematic master narratives in the service of particular interests. Indeed, there is much to criticise about how these events portray contemporary China and its politics, just as there is much to criticise about Chinese politics in general. In terms of civil liberties, the PRC ranks among the poorest countries in the world. The liberal American organisation Freedom House (2017) regularly classifies China as 'not free', with the country scoring only 15 out of 100 potential points in the human rights organisation's 2017 score for 'Freedom in the World'. In terms of political freedoms, Freedom House awarded the PRC only a single point out of 40 in its 2017 assessment.

It would be a mistake to belittle or ignore such concerns, or the many challenges that the PRC faces today, even though such scoring exercises arguably force an understanding onto politics that is rooted in American and European self-perceptions of 'freedom'. The consequent judgements frequently say more about those who are judging than about those who are thus judged. Such criticism also at times risks obscuring how complex the PRC's social and political environment actually is, and it does not always sufficiently acknowledge the degree with which this environment continuously changes. This problem extends to discussions of China's staged spectacles and the diversity of their messages. We can learn

much from these events, beyond the stories of perceived domination vs resistance. Jeffrey Wasserstrom (2016: 9-17), for instance, fruitfully compares the PRC's efforts to host the Beijing Olympics and Shanghai Expo with the efforts by the State of Japan to host the Tokyo Olympics and Osaka Expo some 40 years earlier. He discusses how China and Japan each tried to use such events to overcome the legacies of their modern histories, and the parallels with Japan are indeed striking (see Wilson 2012). I will return to their relevance in the next chapter, but what matters here is that mass spectacles can be important windows into domestic and international politics. As Callahan (2010) points out in his account of how political communication features in China's security policies, 'the opening ceremony of Beijing's Summer Olympics can tell us much about the political direction of China's rise' (ibid.: 1).

Others have similarly made the case that understanding political communication in China is crucial for understanding the politics of the country as a whole. Frank Pieke (2016) makes this clear in his discussion of how the CCP has been innovating and updating its ideology since 1978. To Pieke, the Party has been extraordinarily skilled at constructing messages meant to convince the wider public of the CCP's legitimacy to rule China: 'communist ideology is the constantly evolving fruit of highly specialized creative work that compellingly presents these messages as conveying the only possible correct understanding and evaluation of reality' (ibid.: 25). China's networked spectacles have been an important site for negotiating these messages, and I believe we should heed Pieke's advice that 'those who want to understand what the Party has to say had better suppress their scepticism and learn this language and its referents' (ibid.).

Staged spectacles in China are an ideal place to study such communication codes. Taking a closer look at how different actors produced these events, and what was actually communicated through them, promises to shed light on the rich roles these events play in contemporary Chinese politics. Indeed, as others have pointed out, these events are relevant in a number of ways, for instance as opportunities for implementing infrastructure and urban planning projects (Dreyer 2012, Sun & Ye 2010), as incentives for increasing tourism (Yu et al. 2012), as attempts to affect public opinion (Chen 2012, Cull 2008), and as vehicles for legitimating the politics of the day (Brady 2009).

I will discuss these dimensions in detail, but I will also make the case that staged spectacles in China showcase two important dynamics

that are too often overlooked, and that make these events what I call 'networked spectacles': elaborate mass events, designed to be aesthetically striking, that offer various actors the chance to reconfigure organisational and ideational networks in the service of their respective political projects. The first dynamic that creates these networked spectacles is that China's authorities have generally transformed politics into a mixture of hierarchical and collaborative processes that involve a wide range of networked actors and that are highly flexible, adaptive, and consensus-seeking; China's networked spectacles are as much examples of these politics as they are sites of innovation where networked forms of governance can be tested. The second dynamic is that the diverse actors involved in China's networked spectacles use their unevenly distributed communicative resources and skills to construct and reshape the very meanings of politics, which makes these events ideal sites for tracing how Chinese politics are shifting. In short, the PRC has re-invented itself and its modes of governance for the 21st century, and its networked spectacles have been important testing grounds and sites of innovation during that process, providing real-world laboratories to test different approaches to power, legitimation, and meaning-making.

1.2 Power in networked politics

How, then, should we conceptualise these attempts to recalibrate politics through networked spectacles? This question is closely tied to issues of power, and to how power works in complex societies. To gain purchase on such processes, I find it helpful to view these spectacles as examples of networked politics, and to turn to the work of network scholars for theoretical and empirical insights into how people interact, communicate, and generate meanings through their interactions. Throughout this book, I will draw from three intellectual projects that each deal with networks: the macro-sociology that fuels arguments about how power works in network societies, the micro-sociology that informs discussions about so-called interaction ritual chains and actor-networks, and the communication theory of conceptual blending, which explores how actors make meanings out of complex networks of mental concepts.

In what follows, I will explain each of these projects in turn, followed by a practical example from China. Readers who are less interested in these theoretical discussions of how we might create our societies through

networked communication processes may of course skip ahead to the methodological foundations of this book (section 1.6) or the overview of its sections (1.7). Throughout the subsequent chapters, I have tried to avoid unnecessary academic jargon, and I have compiled definitions of core technical terms such as ‘conceptual blending’, ‘interaction ritual chain’, or ‘networked spectacle’ in the glossary for easy reference. I would nevertheless recommend bearing with me for the conceptual detour I have provided below, as it covers the basic mechanics of contemporary political communication, along with a discussion of the intellectual traditions that inform my analysis of such communication.

Before proceeding with this theoretical account, a word of caution is in order. Each of the three fields I have drawn from here (macro-sociology, micro-sociology, and communications theory) makes assumptions about what society is and what scholars might emphasise to best understand it. Some of these premises may at times seem inconsistent or even mutually exclusive. For instance, is it empirically correct to say that ‘China is organising a spectacle’? Or, rather, is it correct to aggregate social interactions between individual human beings into larger, unified organisations such as nation-states, corporations, and so on, and to then treat those organisations as actors in their own right? Who is really ‘acting’ in such cases? Macro-sociologists may at times find it acceptable to use shorthand to describe what organisations are doing, whereas micro-sociologists frequently consider such simplifications to be anathema.

To give another example of conceptual disagreement: regardless of who or what qualifies as an agent, it is widely accepted throughout much of the so-called social sciences that such agents then act within pre-existing structures such as material, social, and ideational constraints. The choices of decision-makers reflect their knowledge of the world, the financial restrictions they labour under, the norms they have been socialised into, and so on. However, it remains contested how strongly agents create and change these structures, and whether such structures can be agents in their own right (can a social norm act upon somebody, or is it really other people enforcing that social norm and creating social pressure through their interactions?). Such issues have led some sociologists to argue that distinctions between agency and structure are, in fact, a false dichotomy to begin with (Collins 2004: 570, Latour 2005: 202–203).

Such issues go to the heart of disputes between structuralists (who assume structure exists before and outside human experience) and

poststructuralists (who argue that all structures are constraints of our own making), as well as various strands of functionalists (who believe that every structure has a social purpose). My goal is not to trace these debates and their intellectual history here; interested readers may turn to a number of useful introductions, e.g. Belsey (2002), Elliott & Lemert (2014, especially chs 5 to 7), Han (2014), the tongue-in-cheek Palmer (1997), and — specifically on Foucault's transition from structuralism to post-structuralism — Dreyfus & Rabinow (1982/2014). Instead of discussing these various schools of thought in detail, I will shamelessly poach disparate traditions to highlight commonalities that I believe can be fruitfully put to work to understand China's networked spectacles. In this, I will remain committed to what might be called a critically realist, poststructuralist view of society, in which people use their perceptive, cognitive, and affective faculties to constantly create and revise the symbolic resources through which they make sense of their existence, in interactions with each other and the material world.

A useful starting point for understanding these processes comes from macro-sociologists like Manuel Castells, who try to explain the broad processes that shape our societies today. Castells (1996/2010) proposes that we view society as a 'network society'. He envisages this network society as diverse actors, such as states, enterprises, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which pursue their agendas within advanced communication and information networks. Importantly, Castells (2009) describes two kinds of powerful activities that actors pursue in network societies, and he calls these activities 'switching' and 'programming'.

In Castells' view, networked actors frequently create or sever connections between themselves and others, which allows these actors to configure the network in line with their goals and projects. The ability to exclude actors from a process, for instance by denying them resources or information, is indeed a form of power, as is creating new connections and enabling interactions (see also Lukes 2005). This then is what Castells calls 'switching power': the ability of actors to create or sever ties within a network.

The second crucial kind of activity 'programmes' a network with specific value, that is: with a rationale that then fuels and constrains the actions of the various networked actors. 'Programming power' is the ability to spread certain discourses through a network, for instance by circulating symbols and statements among networked actors that imply

certain assumptions and invite participants to accept these as common sense.

The two types of power frequently work in tandem, with actors trying to switch themselves into networks or creating connections between disparate networks to position themselves to then programme these networks with their own discourses. Take, as an example, the logic of profit that infuses financial networks and guides the behaviour of organisations within markets (see Harvey 2007). It was arguably an extremely effective move of neoliberal economists during the 1970s and 1980s to manoeuvre themselves into close proximity with sympathetic politicians, and for powerfully positioned political actors like Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Regan, or Deng Xiaoping to in turn spread the economic rationale of market capitalism through their own policy-making networks across vast segments of their network societies, by either using existing ties or ‘switching’ on new ties that would connect traditional markets with e.g. education or health-care networks. Infusing these newly connected networks with discourses of productivity, personal responsibility, austerity, and profit-rationales effectively forced participants in those disparate sectors to re-orientate their activities in relation to the values of the market.

Castells’ conceptual work provides a useful entryway into how power works during such complex processes, since it highlights how agents, power, and communication are related. In this, it shares certain similarities with the arguments of German macro-sociologists such as Ulrich Beck (2005), who argues that in late modernity power is no longer just the ability to win the game of politics but is enmeshed with the ability to define the rules of that game, leading to a complex ‘meta-game’. There are also potential points of overlap with Jürgen Habermas’ work, who for instance argues in the *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981/1995: 473) that the ‘systems’ of the market and the state ‘colonize’ the various sectors of our ‘lifeworld’ — a process reflected in the increased commercialisation and bureaucratisation of more and more aspects of our lives. Viewing these processes as networked politics enables us to see the ‘systems’ behind these processes as groups of interlinked actors within the market or the state who switch themselves into other social networks to try and govern them with their values. Castells’ theory also connects with French poststructuralism, e.g. with Michel Foucault’s (1977/1995) argument that people construct, through communication, the background knowledge

that informs their social practices and institutions, an argument I will return to below.

To speak of switching and programming in network societies is indeed an apt metaphor for how communication and power work in complex societies; however the idea of the network society also suffers from several problems: it depicts the networked processes as the outcome of an 'information age' or 'global age', which problematically assumes that history is divided into 'ages', when scholars have repeatedly shown that this idea is itself a modern construct (e.g. Mumford 1967: 22, Graeber 2004: 54). Instead, interactions between people have always created 'networks', and they continue to do so in contexts that can be decidedly low-tech. What is more, Castells' network analogy also potentially reproduced the problematic assumption that advanced ICTs create processes that take place in 'virtual realms', removed from material interactions and conditions, when really our interactions remain firmly tethered to the material world and our places in it. Finally, Castells remains frustratingly abstract on the exact, practical workings of power in networks: how exactly does an actor 'programme' a network with value? What chain of events has to unfold in order for such an activity to succeed?

To be fair, Castells has revisited and refined some of his earlier work (e.g. 1996/2010) to show how the processes he describes are embedded in political economies, and his later arguments (in Castells 2009) about how powerful, entrenched actors like states and corporations configure networks provides a useful corrective to the impression that his work favoured only progressive underdogs who strove for social change. Nevertheless, the exact workings of networked power remain vague. I have tried to provide an account of how programming and switching power might be understood as actors calibrating the administrative privileges of specific networks (Schneider 2018: ch.8), and I still believe this is an appropriate metaphor where communication networks are concerned, but more work needs to be done to unpack how human interactions take place in, and ultimately calibrate, different kinds of networks.

1.3 How actor networks assemble society

Some of the most meticulous and insightful studies of such interactions come from sociologists and anthropologists who explore the intricacies of everyday life. These studies update and extend the work of three

influential thinkers: Emile Durkheim (1912), who focused on the way that social rituals turn the mundane into the sacred; Clifford Geertz (1973/2000), who stressed that human beings inhabit 'webs of symbols' that they themselves create; and Erving Goffman (1959, 1967, 1974), who showed how people act out their face-to-face interactions on 'stages' with different publics.

Combining these insights to varying degrees, scholarship in micro-sociology has made the case that what we call 'society' is actually disparate sets of highly contextual networks that actors construct through their recurring inter-subjective activities. In this understanding, subjects are formed through the chains of interactions they experience, leaving individuals with ever-changing, situational identities. As Collins (2004: 26) writes:

Agency, which I would prefer to describe as the energy appearing in human bodies and emotions and as the intensity and focus of human consciousness, arises in interactions in local, face-to-face situations, or as precipitates of chains of situations.

In this view (*ibid.*), participants in a specific situation 'charge' their interaction with emotions, giving it meaning and making it memorable. As actors fill shared moments with specific relevance, they frequently outsource their associations and sentiments to cultural artefacts (see Sperber 1996). In this way, they create objects that come to stand for the original experience and that can at times become, to use Durkheim's terminology, sacred (Collins 2004: 69). This, then, is how group cohesion comes about: through actors engaged in rituals. Collins describes such rituals as mechanisms 'of mutually focused emotion and attention producing a momentarily shared reality, which thereby generates solidarity and symbols of group membership' (*ibid.*: 26). As I will show throughout this book, networked spectacles are sites of precisely such rituals.

These micro-sociological arguments about how human interaction creates meaning are not merely theoretical abstractions; they have practical implications. Rather than accepting concepts like 'culture' or 'society' as pre-existing realms that influence human processes, these approaches prompt researchers to ask how such realms are really constructed, and in the process to pay close attention to the details of who is doing what, and in which situations. Micro-sociology consequently

provides an important corrective to macro-sociological accounts, which have been criticised for 'the error of describing how things happen in the social world without mentioning how people might make them happen, or, indeed who the people are who make them happen' (Billig 2013: 142). Empirical studies in the micro-sociological vein have yielded insightful results, including how scientists conduct scientific experiments (Latour & Woolgar 1979/1986), how people use specific technologies like the internet in their everyday lives (Miller & Slater 2000), how economists think about and ultimately create financial markets (MacKenzie 2006), or how and why people smoke (Collins 2004: ch.8), to give just a few examples.

Despite the many differences between these studies, they share a commitment to tracing how actual people enact sociality and meaning through their interactions, and they consequently align fairly well with the research programme that Bruno Latour (2005) has proposed under the banner of 'actor-network theory'. To Latour, scholars should indeed follow the actors closely, trying to 'catch up with their often wild innovations in order to learn from them what the collective existence has become in their hands, which methods they have elaborated to make it fit together, which accounts could best define the new associations that they have been forced to establish' (ibid.: 12). He further proposes that we extend the reasoning of Goffman's work to map how people interact with one another and, importantly, to trace how they interact with various objects, and how objects in turn interact with each other.

This leads Latour to redefine the meaning of 'actor' as 'any thing that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference' (ibid.: 71, emphasis in the original). He argues that the following should then be the new default position for social inquiry: 'that all the actors we are going to deploy might be associated in such a way that they make others do things' (ibid.: 107, emphases in the original).

Latour sees these associations as playing out as a network, as a 'a string of actions where each participant is treated as a full-blown mediator', meaning that people and objects act upon, and in some way transform, others in the network (ibid.: 128). If traced carefully, such a network is precisely the context in which actions take place. This is one of Latour's most intriguing observations, since it moves away from the idea that context exists outside interactions, instead seeing it as something that has to be explained as part of the situation itself. 'Context' is the span of traceable interactions within a network (ibid.: 202). These interactions

may not be 'local', in a geographical or even temporal sense (for instance an event in the city of Shanghai in 2010), but they constitute the network within which 'a bewildering array of participants is simultaneously at work' and 'which are dislocating their neat boundaries in all sorts of ways, redistributing them away and making it impossible to start anywhere that can be said to be "local"' (ibid.).

Again, these conceptual concerns have practical implications. Latour (ibid.: 147) writes the following about actor-network theory:

Its main tenet is that actors themselves make everything, including their own frames, their own theories, their own contexts, their own metaphysics, even their own ontologies. So the direction to follow would be more descriptions [of these processes].

To fully understand what power is, and how it works, we need to examine closely how different actors *assemble* the social, i.e. how they act upon each other, and how these actions create cultural objects that act upon others in turn. Networked spectacles are perfect arenas for exploring such complex interactions, as they are occasions during which actors come together to create social realities; indeed, it is telling that Latour's seminal book *Reassembling the Social* (2005) has as its cover an illustration of men planning and constructing the Madagascar exhibition at the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris. It is at sites like these that people assemble social relations and cultural meanings.

1.4 Meaning-making in networks

Micro-sociological accounts of networks and interaction ritual chains provide detail-oriented accounts of how humans assemble 'societies', but they go beyond the mere interactions between people and things. As Collins (2003: 1382) argues, they also make a contribution to our understanding of cognition:

Interaction ritual is a full-scale social psychology, not only of emotions and situational behaviour, but of cognition. Rituals generate symbols; experience in rituals inculcates those symbols in individual minds and memories.

This is then a powerful entry into the processes that generate meanings and imbue them with emotions in the human mind. As I will show, actors at networked spectacles frequently produce, draw from, or relay what Müller and Kappas (2011) have called 'pathos formulae'. Following the work of German iconographer Martin Warnke (1980), Müller and Kappas outline how specific symbols such as handshakes between politicians become such tropes, i.e. recurring patterns of signs that, based on a previously established social convention, connect to specific meanings. Such tropes then become anchored to specific sentiments, allowing actors to mobilise them in efforts to trigger emotional responses.

The question of how humans generate their sociality is then also closely linked to questions of how meanings become associated with cultural artefacts, imbued with sentiments, and spread through communication. On this issue, it is worth following Müller and Kappas' example and turning to scholarship on media and communication.

Throughout this introduction, and indeed throughout this book, I refer to the complex communication processes that both inform and are generated by networked spectacles as 'discourses'. Drawing on Michel Foucault's influential work (especially 1965/1988, 1977/1997, and 1978/1990), I understand 'discourse' to mean a set of statements through which communicating agents systematically construct and share their knowledge of the world, in turn creating the raw materials from which they and other actors then go on to form yet more discourse. Importantly, discursive statements reproduce and often re-enforce assumptions about the world that become 'naturalised' as 'common sense', meaning that they become unquestioned truths among certain groups of actors.

Much of Foucauldian discourse theory (e.g. Foucault 1978/1990) highlights how communication is struggle over what should be considered true (see Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982/2014, Howarth 2000). Every time any of us makes a statement, be it verbal or non-verbal, we draw from a pool of social conventions and shared meanings in order to 'make sense'. In doing so, we either reinforce those social conventions and collectively accepted beliefs, or we challenge what others consider to be common sense.

This is not merely a communication exercise: through their interactions, actors turn the assumptions that inform their discourse into actual institutions, for instance when actors adopt certain ideas about mental health or about crime to then create the rationale for treating

mental disorders in certain ways (Foucault 1965/1988), or for constructing particular kinds of prisons (Foucault 1977/1995).

Discursive struggles over what should constitute truth are crucial to how societies become constituted. Communication is very much an interplay between status-quo-oriented actors who contribute to 'hegemonic' discourses and attempts by agents of social change to challenge established truths with 'counter-hegemonic' discourses, for better or worse. I will discuss a number of examples in this book where these dynamics are indeed at play, for instance when human rights organisations challenge the Olympic narrative of China's central government, or when foreign expo pavilion organisers intentionally create counterpoints to the official Shanghai Expo narrative. Nevertheless, viewing discourse solely as struggle would not capture the full complexity of communication processes, especially not in dynamic and multifarious cases like networked spectacles, which is precisely why I have drawn so heavily from network theories to conceptualise how discourse might work during such events. Social and discursive practices are interlinked with each other through the networked interactions of diverse actors, many of whom negotiate and collaborate with each other as they go about making meanings. Not all of these interactions are struggles.

Discourse analysis is strongest when it examines textual evidence, but networked spectacles are media events: they compile written and verbal statements with elaborate (and often dynamic) visual and acoustic arrangements for dissemination to diverse mass audiences. What is more, these arrangements take place over extended periods of time, across dedicated spaces like Beijing's National Stadium, Tiananmen Square, or the Shanghai Expo territory along Shanghai's Huangpu River, and they frequently rely on visitors and audiences, as well as media professionals, to collaboratively construct discourses through interactions with each other and with media contents.

To study the communicative dimensions of such interactions, I have drawn from semiotics, especially the work of Umberto Eco (1979) and Charles Sanders Peirce (compiled in Hoopes 1991). Whereas discourse analysis looks at the statements that cultural products contain, semiotics unpacks these statements to show how they consist of assemblages of signs: things that stand for other things, such as a visual representation that denotes an 'apple', or that by extension connotes a specific company that produces digital devices. By identifying and tracking signs, semiotics

reveals how different actors create, re-appropriate, and re-invent the visual, acoustic, and textual building-blocks that form 'multi-modal' discourses (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001), such as those that circulate through China's networked spectacles.

Both discourse theory and semiotics have been criticised, e.g. by Collins (2004: 27 & 52), for their perceived tendency to outsource too much of the human meaning-making process to external, structural realms, such as the history of ideas (in the case of discourse theory) or sets of cultural codes (in the case of semiotics). In this line of argument, both of these approaches tend to return to structuralist assumptions, bypassing the people who are creating the signs and discourses through their continuous chains of interactions. While such warnings are well taken, they nevertheless risk dismissing these schools of thought too quickly. Foucault's later work shifts away from his earlier structuralist leanings, and semioticians have likewise updated their research programmes to emphasise the social element in communication processes and link social practices back to the meanings of signs (e.g. Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006 and Van Leeuwen 2005).

It is indeed not hard to see how the core arguments in discourse theory and semiotics can be brought into fruitful dialogue with the works of micro-sociologists, whose own reasoning (e.g. Collins 2004: 63) is frequently similar to that of critical theorists like Foucault. After all, communication is also an interaction ritual, one in which actors creatively combine signs to generate meanings.

Fauconnier and Turner (2002) call these kinds of activities 'conceptual blending', and they make a strong case for understanding them as creative efforts that take place in agents' mental spaces. These spaces 'contain elements and are typically structured by frames. They are interconnected and can be modified as thought and discourse unfolds. Mental spaces can be used generally to model dynamic mappings in thought and language' (ibid.: 40). The authors go on to provide involved models of how networks of meanings can be juxtaposed to create new meanings, often in ways that seem effortless and 'natural' to those participating in the process, even though 'it takes all of our cognitive powers to have common sense' (ibid.: 54).

In practice, Fauconnier and Turner's approach entails identifying the sets of meanings that actors pull together as they construct their discursive statements, and it involves exploring how these actors then manipulate, combine, and frame symbolic elements in distinct 'input spaces' to yield

a 'blended space' in which they can then explore novel meanings. As an example, Fauconnier and Turner (*ibid.*: ch.3) discuss a riddle, originally presented by Arthur Koestler (1964), in which a monk travels up a holy mountain one day, and then back down a few days later. The puzzle: is there a time on each of those days at which the monk occupies the same space on the path? Answering this question requires a mental leap in which we imagine the monk moving up and down the mountain on the same day, effectively encountering himself somewhere in the middle. Fauconnier and Turner use this act of counterfactual reasoning to show how human thought frequently relies on concepts and relations in one 'mental space' (the journey up the mountain) and concepts and relations in another (the journey down the mountain) to create new meanings in a 'blended space' that existed in neither of the two inputs (an encounter between two monks).

A number of interesting things are happening in this example, and I can recommend following the authors' thoughtful explanations in the original (*ibid.*: 39-50). Two aspects of their argument are particularly worth stressing here: that networks produce emergent properties, and that these properties can be studied empirically.

A fundamental characteristic of a complex system such as a social or conceptual network is that it 'exhibits nontrivial emergent and self-organizing behavior', meaning that complex processes generate outcomes that are more than the sum of the parts that originally went into the process (Mitchell 2011: 13). Importantly, emergent properties cannot be predicted. A good example is evolution (see Fauconnier & Turner 2002: 55), which is a complex process combining drifts in genetic materials with the dynamics of natural selection over extended periods of time. Biologists would be hard pressed to say how any given species will evolve next. This is not merely a practical matter of missing data: even if scientists had all the possible data points that feature into the complex process of evolution, the dynamics of these factors would create new properties that can never be predicted. Complexity defies prediction, in practice as well as in principle (Mitchell 2011: 33). That said, complexity is not arbitrary, and it can be explained. After all, biologists are indeed able to show scientifically how different species have evolved.

Social and political interactions are also complex, as are psychological processes: when two people meet and interact, events unfold dynamically. A sudden memory leads to an awkward silence; laughter ensues even though a joke fell flat; someone has a new thought, based

on an unexpected association with something someone said, etc. When meanings mesh, new stories are told and new ideas emerge. In any complex network, the outcomes of such processes will remain unpredictable, but they can be traced and explained if we follow the actors and how they assemble symbolic resources into new meanings. As these assemblages become repeated and redeployed, they potentially turn into tropes, and in extreme cases into background knowledge and 'frames' that provide the resources for the next rounds of meaning-making. The theory of conceptual blending then provides a useful entry into how networked interactions construct and relay beliefs.

1.5 An example of discursive innovation: the mascot's butt crack

To give an example of actor-networks and the discourses they generate, consider a string of interactions that unfolded during the Shanghai Expo in 2010, and that generated new meanings about the event. In the run-up to the expo, the authorities issued a call for designs of the event mascot. They then commissioned the Taiwanese designer Wu Yong-jian, who created the blue comic character Haibao (海宝). The Shanghai city government then rolled out a public relations campaign that strongly featured the mascot, covering advertising spaces across the city with posters and putting up statues of the blue Haibao (see Figure 1.1).

The mascot design itself already illustrates important characteristics of conceptual blending, and we could 'dip' into the social interactions at this point to analyse how the mascot combines different 'inputs': it integrates the Chinese character for person (*ren* 人) and various associations with the city of Shanghai (the blue colour of the sea, the idea of a wave, the character for 'sea', *hai* 海, which also forms the second part of the city's name Shanghai) to create something new: a personification of the event.

Actor-networks lend themselves to such explorations of meaning-making at 'nodes' of the network, and indeed any part of the interaction chains may be worth unpacking, depending on the questions that are at stake. In this case, I am interested in a communication process that took place after the authorities established the mascot as a symbol of the expo.

On 22 March 2010, and in the first instance unrelated to the expo, a group of Chinese citizens published a letter to the Chinese authorities demanding that it deregulate the internet and enable Chinese users to



Figure 1.1: Haibao statues in Shanghai, 2010. Image © F. Schneider 2010.

freely access websites through search engines. On the evening of the same day, and probably as a response to this letter, the search giant Google followed through on earlier threats it had issued to stop its censoring practices in the PRC. The company abandoned its mainland search engine www.google.cn and redirected all traffic from that site to its Hong Kong equivalent www.google.hk, where the mainland's censorship laws do not apply (an almost minute-by-minute breakdown of the events of that day is recounted by Johnson 2010).

Back to matters of the expo: on 22 April 2010, the influential blogger, novelist, race-car driver, and enfant terrible Han Han (韩寒; see Strafella & Berg 2015) published on his blog a mock interview with himself about the Shanghai Expo, ostensibly to pre-empt journalists from asking him about the event. His comments were relayed through the internet and received coverage in domestic and foreign media; they would later be taken down from his blog, though copies are still available online (e.g. Han 2010).

One of the questions Han Han asks himself in the interview is how he feels about the World Fair's 2010 mascot Haibao. His answer (translated in Goldkorn 2010):

Haibao has given people a really bad headache. I'm not even talking about his image, just his design. Haibao's original two-dimensional design has created a really difficult problem for those tasked with making him three dimensional: what should his backside look like? Does he have a tail? Does he have a butt? Does he have a butt crack? These are all unknown. That's why we can see towering Haibao statues whose fronts are all the same, but whose backsides, you will discover, may or may not have butt cracks. But recently, there are more without butt cracks because the butt cracks have already announced that they're leaving China.

海宝是一个让人非常头疼的东西，因为从城市中矗立的海宝雕像可看出，有的海宝没有股沟，有的海宝有股沟。但是最近以没有股沟的海宝居多，因为股沟已经离开中国了。

Importantly, the Chinese word for 'butt crack' (*gugou* 股沟) sounds similar to the transliteration for 'Google' (*guge* 谷歌), creating a tongue-in-cheek analogy between the mascot and China's information politics. The core statement remains implicit, though that does not make it any less provocative: due to the government's cyber politics and the departure of Google, China now resembles a person that lacks an anus and consequently has to process its faeces internally.

I have illustrated the interaction and meaning-making process in Figure 1.2 below. The lower part of the figure traces a number of important actors and how they interacted: the authorities, the designer, the Haibao symbol and statues, Google, and of course Han Han and the interview he issued. Again, each of these interactions might generate new questions and empirical analysis, expanding the network further, for instance to explore how China's central government creates and implements the censorship laws that affected Google, or the competitive dynamics in China's search engine market that made it a reasonable move for Google's executives to abandon their mainland endeavours. I have not added this kind of complexity here, since my concern is with Han Han's analogy, which is modelled in the top part of the figure.

One input space draws its signs from the Shanghai expo discourse and the symbolism of its mascot; it reflects social interactions between the Shanghai-based expo office, the designer, and the various cultural products associated with Haibao. Another input space draws from the

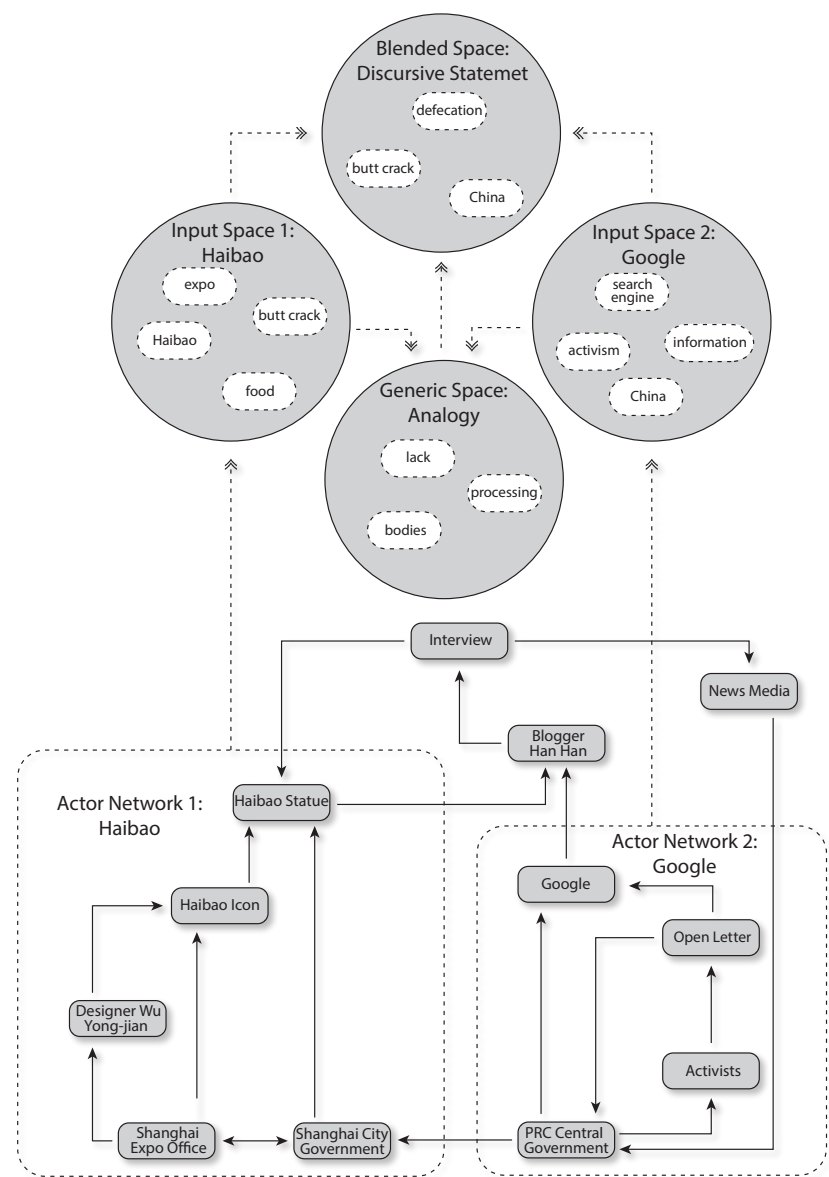


Figure 1.2: Blended Meanings and Haibao's Butt Crack. Image © F. Schneider 2019.

recent events surrounding Google’s departure from China and the company’s relationship with the PRC central authorities.

Below these two circles and the semiotic components they contain is a ‘generic space’ that contains commonalities between the two: each

contains an actor with a physical representation (Haibao's body vs. China's territory); each speaks of a lack (Haibao statue's lack of a butt crack vs China's lack of free search engines); in each case, something is processed (food vs information). The generic space is where the analogy is constructed.

Finally, Han Han's analogy invites his audience to 'project' selected analogous elements from the inputs to the 'blended space', which I have represented as the top circle. Here, the reader recombines the available signs with the help of the frame that Han Han has made available through his narrative, and this is what forms the discursive statement: on the eve of hosting an important international event, China is becoming more inward-looking. Note how this meaning is made plausible by the elements that the actor draws from: the expo symbolism and the wordplay involving the corporation's name. At the same time, the result is indeed more than the sum of the parts: neither input contained the idea of defecation, for example. This meaning becomes available during the interpretation because conceptual blending, as Fauconnier and Turner (2002: 48) write, encourages pattern completion, meaning that 'we see some parts of a familiar frame of meaning, and much more of the frame is recruited silently but effectively to the blend'. Not having a butt crack is one thing, but the important cognitive leap is to imagine what would happen if someone did not have a butt crack, and to then extend that logic to an entity that is not itself a person, and that most certainly does not have a humanoid anatomy (here: a country).

This example illustrates how micro-sociological processes create opportunities for actors to generate discourse, and how one specific actor draws from semiotic resources and cognitive frames to creatively assemble new meanings, which are injected back into networks where they may serve as political interventions. I will showcase and analyse numerous such examples throughout this book, along with the idiosyncratic processes that unfold as different actors get their hands on the communicative building-blocks. It is, for instance, by no means the case that Han Han's analogy allows for only a single interpretation, though certain interpretations are certainly more plausible in light of the frame that the author 'flags' for his target audience. This is then also true for official statements and symbols. As I will show, actors at networked spectacles expend a great deal of effort to disambiguate (and sometimes intentionally obscure) their messages by encouraging certain blended meanings to emerge through their semiotic manipulations.

1.6 Analysing networked spectacles

How, then, should such a study proceed? I have so far discussed the conceptual assumptions that fuel my analysis of networked spectacles, moving from theories of networked social interactions to accounts of how communication generates meaning. As I have pointed out, these theoretical considerations have very real practical implications: they focus attention on people, the cultural objects they produce, and the interactions that ensue between actors in successive situations. I have also suggested that we explore social and discursive processes by tracing the concrete activities of networked actors, the ways in which they assemble meanings in the form of cultural artefacts, and how they then feed the discourses that these artefacts relay back into the networks. In this book, I will apply this logic to China's networked spectacles, concretely to the large-scale, staged events that the PRC organised during the Hu-Wen administration: the Beijing Summer Olympics in 2008, the 60th Anniversary of the PRC in 2009, and the Shanghai World Exposition in 2010.

My goal is twofold: firstly, it is to establish what kinds of stories these events told, what kinds of messages they contained, both for domestic and foreign audiences, and who shaped these messages. Secondly, it is to explore how these events served the CCP as watershed moments in its political, economic, and cultural development of China, and how they provided crucial sites for networked actors to field-test, calibrate, and perfect their approach to governance.

To this end, my study will focus on how different actors produced the three networked spectacles, constructed their discourses, and reworked networks of ideas in the process. Empirically, I have analysed the production and dissemination processes by conducting interviews with event planners, organisers, officials, journalists, and other media workers who were involved in creating the events. I have augmented the insights from those interviews with a close study of official documents, news reports, and academic accounts. These resources form the basis for my analysis of actor-networks and the interactions they enabled.

Where primary materials came into play, I have conducted discourse analyses of the statements that these materials contained (if not noted otherwise, all translations are my own). As pointed out above, the strength of marrying micro-sociological work with discourse analysis and semiotics is that this move encourages scholars to view communication

as contributing to a continuous flow of knowledge, assembled by senders of messages according to socio-cultural conventions (or codes) and transmitted to recipients who decode and interpret the messages. Understood in this way, we can capture such processes and analyse them empirically. We can ask: who constructs what messages, and what resources do they draw from during their interactions, to make those messages intelligible and (possibly) convincing to specific audiences? Answering this question will then also provide insights into the power dynamics that govern networked spectacles in China, and into the communication strategies that different actors adopt in order to shape the discourses at such events in line with their own ideas, world views, and interests.

Importantly, networked spectacles are created for mass consumption. They are mass spectacles. This means that the meanings they generate are by no means arbitrary, even if they are highly diverse. In order to function as mass communication, networked spectacles need to communicate their messages in such a way that the broadest possible audience will interpret and understand their meanings in similar ways (see Carroll 1998 for a discussion). This is not to say that different audience members may not come up with extremely idiosyncratic interpretations of what they are witnessing, but it usually means that such idiosyncrasies are rarely intended and not normally widespread. Where they are, this exception then deserves special scrutiny. Discourse analysis, semiotics, and conceptual blending provide useful methods for in turn exploring such unexpected meaning-making processes. It is then possible for researchers to analyse media products and cultural expressions in a way that can distil the most readily available meanings as well as interesting discursive innovations.

By breaking discourse down into discursive statements and then systematically analysing the components, it is possible to reconstruct the assumptions that informed the discourse. It is these methods that enable critical discourse research to shine a spotlight on the power relations that actors reinforce by establishing certain beliefs as part of a generally accepted worldview (see the contributions in Wodak & Krzyzanowski 2008 and Wodak & Meyer 2009). But how should analysts deal with the methodological challenges that the complexity of networked spectacles creates? Mass communication processes like those that take place at networked spectacles combine various different discourses, and they do so in different modes and through different channels of communication.

Discursive statements frequently connect several topics, or what Siegfried Jäger (2004) calls different 'discourse strands'. For instance, statements about the connection between environmental sustainability and pre-modern Chinese philosophy, such as those that could be found at the Shanghai Expo (see chapter 6), become coherent when they appeal to collectively recognisable knowledge about the individual topics and their relationship. A study of networked spectacles then needs to remain sensitive to discursive juxtapositions and intertextualities, and this is why I have drawn from the conceptual blending approach outlined above which, together with the toolboxes from discourse analysis and semiotics, informs my qualitative study of meanings at China's networked spectacles.

In practice, I home in on diverse cultural products and sources to map how actors interweave 'strands' of discourse and generate meaning on such occasions. My study of the political discourses that the events communicate covers broadcasts of the events, news articles, event merchandise, exhibits, staged performances, cultural products like films and interactive displays, the physical spaces and buildings where the events took place, as well as official media guides and public relations materials.

As I have noted above, and as this list of sources also suggests, discourse does not consist solely of written or spoken text. It incorporates a large array of visual and acoustic cues, as well as the technical affordances of the media through which actors communicate. In practice, exploring these dimensions meant logging communication processes in protocols such as those that film studies scholars use (Korte 1999) or creating geographical representations of particular sites. It also meant venturing to those sites and participating in events, most notably during the Shanghai Expo, where I spent three weeks conducting first-hand research throughout July 2010.

1.7 Overview of the book

This book is organised into nine chapters. To provide context for this book's analyses and arguments, the next chapter discusses the relevance of networked spectacles, both in China and elsewhere. How should we make sense of large-scale events like parades or festivals, particularly when societies use mass-delivery technologies to frame these events and

disseminate their political messages to large numbers of people, as is the case with world expositions or Olympic Games? What distinguishes a large-scale event from a mass event, and what happens when mass events become mediated and turn into media events? What roles do such events play in modern politics, how do they reproduce or challenge the logic of modern economic production, and how do they accommodate specific approaches to communication and didactics? By drawing attention to recurring historical patterns in large-scale staged spectacles, for example in comparison to past cases like the Tokyo Olympics and Osaka Expo in Japan, the chapter shows why organising such events has become a crucial part of Chinese political communication.

Chapter 3 recounts how a diverse range of political actors designed and organised events such as the Beijing Olympics and the Shanghai Expo. The chapter first discusses the relationship between the Chinese state and the Communist Party, and how different agencies from these domains commission and control China's networked spectacles. It then goes on to show that this process is not a simple matter of top-down 'governing', but rather of collaborative 'governance' – an approach that later continued to inform the political practices of the PRC under Xi Jinping's leadership. To illustrate how this process works, the chapter analyses how different actors planned the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony, how the authorities managed the Shanghai Expo territory, and what went into organising a national pavilion at that Expo. The chapter concludes with the argument that China's networked spectacles are examples of 'cultural governance', that is: of attempts to regulate society collaboratively by regulating the symbolic galaxy in which actors then enact their politics.

Following this discussion of how different actors create and regulate China's networked spectacles, chapter 4 turns to the meanings that official actors try to programme into the events. The chapter proceeds chronologically, first examining the 2008 Beijing Olympics opening ceremony, then the 2009 PRC anniversary parade, and finally the Shanghai Expo with its iconic China Pavilion and the official exhibitions that this building housed. Finally, it discusses how official media products such as news reports, films, and documentaries framed the events, specifically the 2009 anniversary. As I show, the various official actors used the trope of China's 'Road to Revival' to tell stories of national rejuvenation, creatively deploying for instance young children and recognisable elements from

historical golden ages to locate contemporary China on a modernist time-line of progress.

A crucial component of this linear narrative is the notion of the Chinese nation. Official actors evoke this imagined community through their use of nationalist symbolism, but they also programme and re-programme what that nation should stand for at the start of the 21st century. Chapter 5 first discusses the relevance of nationalism in the Chinese context, and the ways in which actors communicate nationalism through mass media. It then explores how the Chinese authorities in charge of propaganda design and disseminate the key terminology of the nation, and how practices to define official ideological ‘watch words’ (known in Chinese as *tifa* 提法) also extend to visual cues and their emotional anchors. The chapter then examines how official actors use recognisable symbols to ‘flag’ national attachment during the PRC national anniversary, and it examines the rhetorical moves they make to suggest that the nation should be viewed the same way one might view a close, lovable family member. Next, the chapter takes a look at how China’s networked spectacles constructed the nation as an ancestral land, drawing from historical elements to create a national narrative. Finally, the chapter returns to some of the conceptual considerations I outlined in this introduction, asking how these practices might invite participants to join in the experience of nationhood, for instance during an event like the world fair, where visitors playfully experiment with their status as national citizens in an imaginary, miniature world.

Chapter 6 returns to the ways in which China’s networked spectacles re-imagined the past, specifically how they evoked pre-modern philosophy and culture to fill contemporary political concepts like ‘harmony’ (*hexie* 和谐) with meaning. I first discuss what role pre-modern ideas have played in contemporary China, and how they have been used by different groups of actors to promote either cosmopolitan or nativist visions of Chinese modernity. Next, I explore the harmony discourses that the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony and the PRC anniversary parade relayed to audiences, focusing on how the Hu-Wen administration’s concept of a ‘harmonious society’ became translated into domestic and foreign contexts, for instance by arguing that the PRC’s government is inherently peaceful due to its embrace of a long-standing tradition of harmony. This discussion is followed by an analysis of how official actors involved in constructing the China Pavilion at the world expo used classic Chinese sources to intervene in harmony discourses and creatively reinvent what

a 'harmonious society' should stand for. Finally, the chapter shows how the China Pavilion's core exhibitions imagined harmony in hypermodern, urban terms, and how these imaginations became the backdrop for decidedly neoliberal arguments about how harmony should imply being individually responsible for one's behaviour.

While chapters 4 to 6 trace how official actors contributed to meanings that emerge from networked spectacles, chapters 7 and 8 turn to the question of what happens when non-official actors get their hands on the semiotic resources that official discourses relay. Chapter 7 asks what becomes of such building-blocks of meaning when they start to travel to foreign contexts. It first reviews how ideas about nation branding and soft power have informed the official attempts to steer meaning-making of Chinese cultural products outside the mainland, and it then examines how these attempts can become hijacked by actors with very different agendas. Following this discussion of explicit counter-discursive activities, the chapter takes a closer look at how foreign actors reproduced the semiotic components of official nationalist discourse to create advertisings for their products. Using the example of Coca Cola commercials, it turns out that such activities generally promote similar nationalistic parameters to those that the authorities endorse, but that they also subtly shift meanings in new directions, for instance by infusing available networks of meaning with commercial rationales, deploying nationalist stereotypes, or adding a cosmopolitan twist to their representations. Finally, the chapter explores how a discourse that was carefully designed to generate 'soft power' was broadcast on television outside the mainland, specifically how two different Taiwanese stations made sense of the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony.

Chapter 8 extends this analysis of multifarious meaning-making by asking how different non-official actors tried to use China's networked spectacles to intervene in domestic Chinese discourses. The chapter begins with a discussion of theoretical arguments that envisage spectacles as powerful semiotic machines that effectively abolish the audience's ability to distinguish between reality and fiction. In contrast to this view, I present various examples of how actors at the Shanghai Expo reprogrammed meanings either to directly challenge or subtly shift what they perceived of as 'dominant' discourses. This included foreign national pavilions that aimed to persuade Chinese visitors of their ideological positions, but also the officially commissioned theme pavilions in which private domestic and foreign actors collaborated to

make meanings that did not fit with the official narratives of, for instance, the China Pavilion. This became particularly visible at the exhibition dedicated to showing visions of the future, where audiences were thrust into a utopian space that confronted them with ambiguous artistic imaginations of hypermodernity. Finally, the chapter turns to a case of domestic actors intervening in political discourses during a networked spectacle, specifically looking at the way that publications by the Southern Media Group in Canton took official discourses on the day of the PRC anniversary to create ambivalent statements about the Chinese nation, inviting readers to either follow the familiar nationalist framework the authorities promoted or step into alternative interpretations that opened up the potential for radically different blends of meanings regarding the Chinese nation at that particular moment in history.

To conclude these analyses, chapter 9 summarises the findings from the various chapters and emphasises the two main arguments of this book: that China's recent networked spectacles can shed light on the frameworks of meaning that inform politics in the PRC today, and that such events can help us understand in what ways politics and communication generally intersect in complex, modern societies. Aside from highlighting how the studies in this book might provide conceptual insights into 21st-century networked politics, the conclusion also stresses the continuities between China's networked spectacles during the Hu-Wen period and the discursive efforts that Xi Jinping's administration has subsequently made in its attempts to govern contemporary China.