

7 Contested Nation Branding

Eric Cartman, the whimsical boy from the animated comedy series *South Park*, is having a nightmare. ‘No, no’, he screams in his sleep. In his dream, he is trapped in the Bird’s Nest Stadium in Beijing during the Olympic opening ceremony. The ominous voice of a TV anchor announces, ‘Thousands of ancient Chinese drummers are drumming thousands of ancient Chinese drums, the precision of their movement made even more powerful by their vast numbers’. The drummers beat their drums while Cartman is tossing in his bed – in his mind, he is trying to find a way out of the maze of drums. ‘Too many of them!’, he gasps. Then he is being flung across the movable typeset that featured in the performance, finally finding himself surrounded by a sea of performers, closing in on him.

As he calls out ‘no, leave us alone’, his mother enters the room, checking whether her son is all right. Little Eric wakes from his nightmare, crying. ‘The Chinese are going to get us! There’s two billion of them and with their advances in technology and their growing economy they are going to bring down America’, he sobs.

Few popular depictions of contemporary American anxieties about China are as prescient as this lovingly crafted satire by the *South Park* creators Terry Parker and Matt Stone (2008). Indeed, the short, one-minute segment highlights the tremendous challenge that Chinese PR specialists face as they try to change international perceptions of the PRC during networked spectacles. In the case of the Beijing Olympics, the carefully crafted discourse on harmony unravelled in foreign contexts, where unity at times became reinterpreted as uniformity, fuelling longstanding Orientalist resentments and fears (see also Gries et al. 2010).

This is not to say that China’s networked spectacles necessarily slotted into ‘China Threat’ perceptions among foreign audiences. For the Beijing Olympics d’Hooghe (2015: 253) finds:

The press generally reported favourably about China’s organisation of the Olympic Games and the press facilities, and hailed China’s

Olympic architecture and the opening and closing ceremonies. Furthermore, most visitors were impressed by the friendliness of the volunteers in Beijing and other Olympic cities.

My own screening of Dutch, German, English, and American foreign telecasts suggests something similar. For instance, German television aired brief interview segments with athletes leaving the stadium after the opening ceremony, and these participants enthusiastically praised the organisers and the impressive event (ARC 2008: 004, Beijing time 23:41):

Athlete 1: 'It was crazy, totally spectacular, and you could enjoy almost every minute there, in that stadium, and, yeah. It was complete crazy for us.'

Coach: 'That was of course a gigantic festival, or rather, it still is.'

Athlete 2: 'I sort of still can't really believe it, I think you'll have to sort of reflect on this some more, and, uhm, in, uhm, retrospect examine that some more, but it was, it was sensational.'

Athlete 3: 'When the fire got lit, well that was... I even had tears in my eyes. So that was really crazy.'

Athlet 1: 'Es war Wahnsinn, war total spektakulär, und man konnte fast jede Minute dort genießen, in diesem Stadium, und, ja. War absoluter Wahnsinn für uns.'

Trainer: 'Das war natürlich ein gigantisches Fest, beziehungsweise es ist es immer noch.'

Athlet 2: 'Ich kann's eigentlich immer noch nicht richtig fassen, ich glaub man muss da noch mal so in sich gehen, und, äh, das, äh, rückläufig noch mal betrachten, aber das war, das war sensationell.'

Athlet 3: 'Als das Feuer entzündet wurde, also das war... da hatte ich sogar Tränen in den Augen. Also das war echt Wahnsinn.'

The impressions that China's networked spectacles made internationally were complex, and they were shaped by the discursive activities of numerous actors switched into the interactions at the events. In this chapter, I ask what ultimately becomes of the carefully programmed discourses once institutionally and ideologically diverse actors start reworking them for their own purposes abroad. I focus explicitly on foreign cultural producers and broadcasters in the context of the Beijing

Olympics, an event that was designed to be consumed internationally. This will include a discussion of how companies and NGOs used the symbols of the Beijing Olympics to make their own statements about the spectacle. Next, I take a closer look at telecasting outside the mainland, specifically at how two ideologically competing television stations in Taiwan broadcast the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony. However, before proceeding to these cases, it is worth turning to a prominent concept that is frequently used to make sense of the Chinese authorities' attempts to brand the nation to foreign audiences through staged spectacles like the Olympics or Expo: the concept of 'soft power'.

7.1 Soft power and nation branding in China

As I have discussed throughout this book, the networked spectacles that the PRC organised under the leadership of the Hu-Wen administration were partly designed to serve as public relations vehicles for the party and state. Such efforts are frequently associated with attempts to generate soft power. 'Soft power' is a term coined by Joseph Nye (2004: 76-77), and it refers to the ability to influence others to develop preferences and interests in ways consistent with one's own. In public diplomacy, the term usually describes a government's ability to influence foreign public opinion in its favour, and to generate goodwill among the citizens of other countries for its foreign policy.

Nye's concept is popular with Chinese administrators and intellectuals alike, who believe (not entirely without cause) that foreign sentiments towards China are marred by threat perceptions, and that they are biased by discourses that hark back to Cold War thinking and orientalist prejudices about a sinister, untrustworthy, and ultimately belligerent and dangerous Chinese state. To many Chinese analysts, these perceptions are generated by the fact that the world does not know or understand the 'real' China (see Latham 2009). Much effort has consequently gone into improving the state's capacities for reaching foreign audiences and promoting a more positive image of the country (see Brady 2008: ch.7, d'Hooghe 2015), for instance in African countries (see the contributions in Zhang et al. 2016).

As a consequence of these discourses within China about foreign anxieties and possible public diplomacy responses, and particularly in the wake of successful cultural diplomacy campaigns that neighbouring

Japan and South Korea rolled out in the 2000s, the PRC government has reoriented its foreign policy strategy to strongly incorporate a soft power dimension (see Brownell 2013: 68 and Li 2009). In 2007, Hu Jintao argued that the PRC needed to ‘enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country’ (Xinhua 2007), and his administration pursued an extensive cultural promotion campaign in the subsequent years (see Barr 2011 and Cull 2008), which included establishing the Confucius Institutes I mentioned in chapter 6, but also expanding Chinese news services for foreign-language speakers (Zhang 2011: 183–188). It remains controversial whether this strategy has had any positive effects (see Brownell 2019), but the general sentiment behind it continues to shape Chinese foreign policy to this day.

Importantly, the administration’s views on soft power were an important driver in how official actors envisaged networked spectacles such as the Beijing Olympics and the Shanghai Expo (see d’Hooghe 2015: ch.6 and Wallis & Balsamo 2016: 35–37). That said, and as popular as the term ‘soft power’ may have become in academic and policy-making circles alike, there are several reasons why it remains problematic as an analytical concept. Of immediate concern should be that soft power was not originally designed with analysis in mind. Nye did not coin the term to explain political behaviour but to influence it. Nye, who has worked both as an academic and a political advisor to successive US Democratic Party presidents and presidential candidates (Clinton, Kerry, Obama), has been a vocal critic of Republican foreign policy and a proactive lobbyist for a stronger US soft-power strategy. To accept that Nye’s concept accurately describes a fundamental aspect of international politics would obscure that it was Nye who actively made that concept a feature of such politics, effectively creating a self-fulfilling prophecy and reifying his own theoretical assumptions. One could argue that the most convincing example of soft-power usage has been Nye’s ability to convince academics and decision-makers that his ideology was worth adopting as a policy-making framework, but that says little about the actual effectiveness of national strategies to persuade foreign audiences through cultural means.

Ultimately, such strategies are informed by a specific rationale regarding culture and media: in the soft-power worldview, the value of cultural artefacts derives from their utility to help one nation-state prevail over another in perceived struggles over cultural attraction. It is this view that leads Nye to argue that Europe is ‘the closest competitor

to the United States in soft power resources' (2005: 75; my emphasis). According to such logic, scientific achievements, economic welfare, and cultural expressions matter because they ostensibly provide politicians of a specific nation-state with the ability to sway foreigners to their cause and promote national interests in what is effectively a zero-sum game of cultural appreciation. Culture becomes a resource for manipulating the dynamics of great-power politics.

While such utilitarian and nationalist reasoning provides a reductionist and anti-humanist take on culture, criticism of this rationale is rarely reflected in the work of soft-power advocates. When I attended an international conference in Hong Kong on Chinese Culture on the World Stage (Hong Kong Baptist University, 14-15 June 2012), heated discussion ensued between Chinese scholars and pundits over how to apply Nye's concept; the discussion drew heavily from nationalist and utilitarian tropes about how to make the PRC strong through cultural promotion, how to compete with the US on issues of cultural appeal, and how to identify and secure resources to create the kind of nativist ethno-epistemology I have discussed in chapter 6. A central concern was how to identify the 'essence' of Chinese culture that would generate attraction for the Chinese nation abroad (e.g. the Confucian classics, Daoist philosophy, Tang-era poetry, etc.). The debate did not, however, address whether Chinese culture had an essence to begin with, why such an essence needed active promotion, or why it should be understood first and foremost as an expression of an immutable 'national' culture (rather than, for instance, reflecting regional and historical changes). In short, there was little reflection on the idea that 'national culture' might itself be a discourse that actors evoke during historically-situated interactions.

The fact that soft power has become a central concept in academic debates and policy-making then does not exonerate the concept as an analytical device. Even if nation-states explicitly adopt soft-power strategies, the question still remains how to explain and assess such attempts to shape political attitudes abroad. In the growing corpus of soft-power literature, it remains unclear to me how the causal link is supposed to work between political agents, their cultural policy, the resulting cultural artefacts, the attractiveness that these artefacts possess, and ultimately the political preferences of those who consume these cultural artefacts (see also the criticism in Barr 2011). Considering these concerns, as well as a number of issues raised elsewhere (e.g. in

Zhang 2009), the explanatory value of the term 'soft power' becomes questionable.

In what follows, I consequently do not try to assess the effects of Chinese soft-power strategies on 'national' audiences abroad. Instead, I view the concept as a cultural artefact in its own right; a concept around which actors create networks of meanings through their interactions. The discourse of soft power is relevant because it informs the public relations strategies of China's networked spectacles, and it provides a rationale for organisers as they engage in a political campaign of cultural promotion, and as they ground their activities in Nye's soft-power ideology to increase their legitimacy (see Callahan 2010: 4). As part of their activities, the actors behind China's networked spectacles mobilised the popular discussions of soft power to conceptualise their activities as acts of public persuasion, and as interventions in a foreign discursive environment that many interpreted as hostile. The organisational practices that helped to create and communicate events like the Olympics or the Shanghai Expo were functions of these understandings of soft power.

7.2 Who speaks for China? Human rights NGOs and the Olympics discourse

A particular challenge for the official actors trying to generate soft-power narratives during events like the Beijing Olympics was that these narratives were not entirely under their control. Event-related symbols and their meanings often got away from the organisers as diverse foreign agents joined the meaning-making processes. In some cases, those agents intentionally and explicitly designed their discursive activities as antagonistic interventions meant to challenge the official efforts of branding the Chinese nation as a peaceful stakeholder in international affairs. Instructive examples are the advertising campaigns of rights organisations. Reporters Without Borders published posters titled 'Beijing 2008', in which the organisers replaced the iconic Olympic rings with interlocking handcuffs. Amnesty International used similar symbolism in its own posters, for instance in one image designed by its Slovakian office (Amnesty 2008b), which depicted the Olympic rings as five circles of barbed wire before a bleak sky. This imagery was accompanied by a text that directly referred to the harmonious-society discourse of the time:

In the name of ensuring stability and harmony in the country during the 2008 Olympic Games, the Chinese government continues to detain and harass political activists, journalists, lawyers, and human rights workers. Get involved.

Another poster, released in Denmark in May of that year (DDB 2008), showed a close-up of a young Asian woman's face, with the PRC flag drawn onto her cheek in the fashion familiar from national sports events the world over, but this flag is smeared by a single tear running down the woman's face. The caption commemorates the 'memory of the Tiananmen Square crackdown' and asks viewers to 'put pressure on China to release the activists and secure a positive Olympic legacy'. In another case, the Hungarian design studio DDB created a poster called *Shot*, which depicted a track race, but with the referee pointing his start gun at a Chinese athlete who kneels in the starting position before an audience of spectators (Amnesty 2008a). The poster is accompanied by an info-text about capital punishment in the PRC. Meanwhile, the Australian section of Amnesty International repurposed the idea of the Fuwa dolls and created its own comic character *Nuwa* (怒娃), or 'Rage Baby', a monkey wearing a red headband like those commonly donned during the 1989 Tiananmen Protests (see Hutcheon 2008).

These campaigns already show how the watch signs of official discourse and the symbols of internationally networked spectacles can come to serve actors who are trying to create counter-discourses. However, this is not where the interaction chains of discursive assemblage ended. These practices provided yet more actors with the chance to switch themselves into the networks of meaning-making, and particularly the affordances of advanced digital information networks ultimately created sites for discursive assemblage that quickly moved in directions not under the control of the original actors who started these processes. Amnesty International's attempts to create and publish materials critical of the Chinese authorities served numerous creatives as an occasion to showcase their visual design skills as well as their commitment to the cause of human rights protection.

One designer (Drent 2008), for instance, created a poster that depicted a sports shoe, but with the red shoelaces repurposed to fold up and bind the front of the shoe, evoking associations with traditional Chinese foot-binding practices. The title of the poster, 'Beijing 2008', uses the same visual trope of barbed wire that Amnesty International deployed in its

own posters, and the footer contains the Amnesty International logo (a candle wrapped in barbed wire) and the same text about the harassment of activists I have quoted above. In another case, two advertising companies expanded the analogy between sports and state violence that DDB had already used in the poster *Shot*, but now transferring that rationale to additional sporting contexts: MUW Saatchi & Saatchi in Slovakia put together a poster series titled 'China is Getting Ready' (an official PRC slogan), which in one instance had a Chinese-looking sports shooter aim his handgun at the back of the head of a kneeling man in ragged prison clothing; two other posters show prisoners dressed in the same rags as they are being beaten and abused by athletes in boxing and wrestling rings, respectively (MacLeod 2008b). In a similar vein, the French advertiser TBWA produced a series of advertisements depicting torture in Olympic sports settings, e.g. Chinese security forces waterboarding a captive in an Olympic swimming pool, a smiling security officer walking away from a prisoner tied to an archery target, and an abused woman chained to a weightlifting barbell (MacLeod 2008a).

These cultural products were not official Amnesty International campaign materials, even if they were labelled as such. In fact, Amnesty International reportedly withdrew the Slovakian campaign and distanced itself from the French 'torture ads' (see Hutcheon 2008, Spencer 2008), but at that time the images had already been uploaded to the internet. It is hard to trace who precisely was responsible for this result; the French advertising agency TBWA later claimed that the images had been the brainchild of a rogue employee working on a pro bono account, and that the campaign was never meant to see the light of day (reported in Fowler et al. 2008). Presumably the controversial advertisements threatened the company's other accounts, e.g. their contract with sports equipment manufacturer Adidas. Be that as it may, once the images made their way online, they powerfully drove debates about Chinese politics in the run-up to the Olympics. Chinese nationalists, for instance, viewed the campaigns as an affront, and they took to social media and online comment sections to curse Amnesty International and its advertising agencies in no uncertain terms. On one Chinese website showing posters from the aborted campaigns (Adfuns 2008), for instance, commentators questioned the 'quality' of 'the French' (法国人怎么这么没素质) and told the producers of the posters to 'go and die' (去死吧). I hesitate to make any claims about the representativeness of such comments; even in nationalist contexts, not all comments on China's internet are necessarily

this chauvinistic (see also Schneider 2018: ch.7). However, these outbursts of online anger demonstrate, as Callahan (2010: 25) has noted, that ‘Chinese nationalism is produced and consumed in an interactive and intersubjective process’, and this process involves diverse actors across the world who engage in discourses about the Chinese nation in often idiosyncratic ways.

Overall, human rights activists and organisations appear to have been fairly effective as they agitated against the Chinese authorities in the run-up to the Olympics, and their often scathing criticism of the human rights situation gathered steam particularly in the wake of the Tibetan riots in early 2008 (see also d’Hooghe 2015: 241–246). It is telling that the Chinese authorities felt it necessary to reposition their own discourses vis-à-vis this strong focus on human rights. After the Sichuan earthquake, for instance, official media were quick to stress to their own citizens that ‘human rights, at their most basic, mean respecting the human right to life and protecting the human right to a livelihood’ (尊重人权, 最基本的就是尊重人的生命权和维护人的生存权, 因为这是一切人权的基础; Luo 2008). Reporting aimed at foreign audiences similarly stressed that the PRC was protecting human rights by ‘putting people first’ (see Schneider & Hwang 2014b: 645 for examples). Foreign critics had skilfully forced a discourse into the event networks that threatened to shift what the values of the spectacle should be, to the point that official Chinese actors felt the need to respond with renewed programming efforts.

7.3 How China’s Olympic symbols were sold

These struggles over symbols and their meanings illustrate that meanings are not easily dictated top-down by official actors, even as these actors labour to create cultural products as forms of soft-power persuasion. The cultural governance approach that the authorities adopted during China’s networked spectacles arguably also facilitated struggles, opening the discourses up to diverse meaning-making efforts.

I will discuss in the subsequent chapter how the cultural governance approach of the authorities led to highly diverse discursive statements during the spectacles themselves, with domestic and foreign actors programming their own meanings into the complex networks, even as they had to limit themselves to the discursive horizon that various constraints created during such events. In this chapter, I have so far

argued that this horizon expanded significantly once the event discourses became revamped abroad, for instance by transnational NGOs. Not all of these activities were driven by activist concerns. Much of the programming that went on at China's networked spectacles involved large multinational corporations that intervened in the event discourses for commercial reasons.

For instance, sports equipment companies such as Adidas and Nike, as well as fast-food chains such as McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken, used events like the Beijing Olympics as a platform to further promote their brands, both globally and in local Chinese markets. As a general communication strategy, the advertising agencies working for these corporations tended to fuse local event symbolism with globally recognisable symbols of the respective brand, a process also known as 'glocalisation' (see O'Barr 2007 and Sinclair 2008), and this then entailed creating discursive statements about the event, the host country, and the role of the foreign brand in that context. In most cases, these meaning-making activities of commercial actors outside China aligned fairly well with the discourses that the authorities had envisaged. The advertisers generally promoted feel-good narratives that promised to frame their specific commercial products as positive, natural components of the spectacle in question. It should not be too surprising that advertisers were trying to avoid alienating their audiences, but it is revealing that their efforts to stay within acceptable event discourses at times led to cultural content that arguably even outdid the soft-power campaigns of official actors. To achieve their commercial goals, many multinationals decided to tap into Chinese patriotic sentiments to promote their products in the PRC, while retaining the cosmopolitan implications of the Olympic spirit to appeal also to audiences abroad. Two Coca Cola commercials are good examples of this strategy: the spots *Bird's Nest* and *Unity*.

The *Bird's Nest* commercial (Coca Cola 2008a), created by the Amsterdam branch of advertising agency Wieden+Kennedy (see MacLeod 2008b), tells the story of five animated birds, each in the colour of one of the five Olympic rings. The birds collect straws from Coca Cola soft drinks to build a nest, and they carry the straws to Beijing from all around the world, passing famous Chinese sites like the Great Wall and the skyline of Shanghai on their way. Back in the capital, the birds put the straws together to build a miniature version of the National Stadium, and the commercial concludes with the five birds sitting together in their 'Bird's Nest', watching the fireworks go off above the actual Bird's Nest Stadium.

The second television spot, *Unity* (Coca Cola 2008b), was produced by Wieden+Kennedy's Portland office (MacLeod (2008a)). It starts as a 40-second animated video of the two basketball stars LeBron James (USA) and Yao Ming (PRC) before morphing into a live-action exchange between the two stars. At the outset of the spot, the two athletes face each other in a mock competition of their two nations. Each draws from a range of cultural symbols to win the fight: James is aided by cowboys, grizzly bears, and an American eagle, while Yao receives support from a dragon, panda bears, and a large fish (a Chinese symbol of prosperity). The two teams confront each other before the backdrop of American and Chinese skyscrapers. Realising that they are evenly matched, each of the stars reaches for his 'secret weapon': a bottle of Coca Cola. Once the two stars discover that they enjoy the same beverage, they exchange Coke bottles and have a drink. The animations melt away and are replaced by real footage of the two men, who now toast to each other – James in Chinese, Yao in English. The advertisement concludes with the campaign slogan, 'unity on the Coke side of life'.

Both these commercials are highly creative combinations of cosmopolitan and nationalist symbols, taken from the context of the 2008 Olympic Games. What is significant here is that each draws from (and arguably reinforces) the discursive elements that shape the official national discourse. The *Bird's Nest* commercial uses the national stadium as a symbol that signifies both China's success and a feeling of belonging: the Bird's Nest becomes a home from which the birds can watch the spectacle, just as the television audiences witness the event from the comfort of their homes. The *Unity* commercial depicts national symbols as resources of individual strength, dipping into essentialist discourses of what might define 'China' or 'America'. What is more, cuteness again plays an important role in how the narratives are presented. Whether it is the little birds and their whimsical attempts to secure construction material for their nests or the cartoon characters in the *Unity* commercial, the nationalist discourse is framed by 'lovable' (*ke'ai* 可爱) imagery similar to that employed during the opening ceremony.

Intriguingly, each commercial implicitly taps into the harmonious society discourses that informed so much of the official political communication surrounding the event, and they produce their own understandings of harmonious co-existence. The national symbols are arranged to tell cosmopolitan and international stories, respectively: the birds come from all corners of the world to witness the Games, just as

foreign visitors and athletes from around the world flock to China for the event, and just as overseas Chinese communities return 'home' for the occasion — whether physically or in spirit. James and Yao set aside their differences by engaging in playful competition, and they ultimately become 'united' by sharing a consumer product. The Olympic spirit, and in this case Coca Cola, is depicted as bringing together different peoples as 'One World'.

What should we make of this commercial use of national symbols? These two advertisements arguably achieve the kind of 'flow' that successful cultural productions require in order to invite buy-in. They are cleverly designed, meticulously produced, and eminently entertaining. One could make the case that they provide the kind of soft-power narrative of which the Chinese authorities have been dreaming. In network terms, the Chinese authorities have successfully switched transnational actors into the network of national meanings. They have also successfully programmed these networks with a range of symbols that carry nationalist connotations, and they have created opportunities for non-state agents to re-use these symbols in commercial, cultural, or artistic contexts that still promote the national interest.

In this view, the commercial actors reinforce the official discourse by drawing from and reproducing these symbols that official actors have either created or occupied for their nation-maintenance projects. To theorists like Michel Foucault (1976), such practices are precisely what sustains discourses in modern societies, which raises questions about whether these discourses should then really be seen as struggles between antagonistic groups trying to occupy the communicative high ground. To Foucault, by excessively focusing for instance on state power in communication practices, we risk 'overlooking all the mechanisms and effects of power which don't pass directly via the State apparatus, yet often sustain the State more effectively than its own institutions, enlarging and maximising its effectiveness' (2007: 179). In this sense, Coca Cola's commercials work because they are grounded in the same idea of *inter-nationality* that also fuels the authorities' conceptualisation of a strong, proud, and harmonious China, and the commercial use of national symbols in turn helps to distribute a handy framework of national meanings to diverse audiences.

While this is certainly an important dimension of how cultural governance encourages the spread of official discourses in network societies, it is also worth pointing out that the commercial actors

are themselves active programmers of discourses. Just as domestic actors in China were reworking official discursive resources to make new meanings, so too did commercial actors reassemble the available symbolism to make sense of the spectacle for themselves and their audiences. What emerged was not necessarily in line with official visions for core concepts like harmony. Nevertheless, we should take Foucault's warning seriously and consider how even interactions that are explicitly conceived of as struggles against official discourse may well reify many of the assumptions that went into making the official discourse in the first place. An interesting question then is what happens to the available discursive threads when foreign broadcasters rework them to weave their own mass media narratives.

7.4 Making sense of China's Olympic efforts in Taiwan

For the Chinese organisers of networked spectacles like the Beijing Olympics, promoting soft power and branding the Chinese nation relied heavily on the first-order audience on the ground and, importantly, the second-order audience of reporters, anchors, and editors in the newsrooms and broadcast centres to relay messages to the third-order audience in front of television sets around the world. The organisers and media workers I interviewed a year after the event were keenly aware of the challenge they faced, especially considering the negative reporting that had preceded the event abroad.

To ensure that their intended, positive messages reached foreign audiences, the organisers took several measures. The first was related to the telecaster Beijing Olympic Broadcasting (BOB), which I mentioned in chapter 3. This joint-venture organisation prepared the visual materials for all foreign broadcasters, with the exception of the American National Broadcasting Company (NBC), and it consequently played a major role in setting the aesthetic and ideological parameters within which foreign stations would then arrange their own commentaries. Within the BOB, the Chinese authorities ensured that PRC officials featured prominently on the board of directors. This 'numerical dominance of Chinese people' ensured that the authorities remained switched into the broadcasting process at a crucial node, even as they experimented with arguably unprecedented forms of international corporation in the broadcasting of an event on Chinese soil (see Brownell 2008: 187).

As a second measure, the Olympic organising committee BOCOG used its position within the networked spectacle to try and programme the discourse through its press conferences, media guides for foreign journalists, press materials like the 32 editions of the Beijing Olympics Newspaper, and previews for selected journalists (see also d'Hooghe 2015: 235-237). In this way, the organisers created conduits for approved information, and in some instances they attempted to tether foreign media workers to these conduits through the promise of preferential treatment and privileged access. This practice was particularly common in interactions with journalists from Hong Kong and Taiwan. The media workers from Taiwan whom I interviewed in fact repeatedly emphasised this cultural proximity and admitted that the relationship between Taiwanese media and their PRC counterparts was much closer throughout the Beijing Olympics than the relationship between Chinese organisers and the foreign press. Through the Beijing International Media Centre (BIMC), established specifically for this purpose by the State Council's Taiwan Affairs Office (国务院台湾事务办公室), Taiwanese journalists received additional PR material, the opportunity to attend dress rehearsals, and privileged access to colleagues and organisers in the PRC (interviews in Taipei, July 2009). How successful were these measures at convincing Taiwanese journalists to then relay the desired messages?

To answer this question, I have analysed how two different television stations in Taiwan broadcast the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony (see also Schneider 2019). The first of these stations was China Television (中国电视, or CTV), a broadcaster traditionally associated with the conservative pan-blue coalition of the Nationalist Party (国民党, or KMT); the second station was Formosa Television (民间全民电视, or FTV), whose editorial position leans towards the liberal pan-green camp led by the Democratic Progressive Party (民主进步党, or DPP). My analysis is based on a shot-by-shot protocol (see Iedema 2001) that lists the images shown on the two stations, juxtaposes them with transcripts of the respective Chinese commentaries, and compares the meanings that emerge with the broadcast that aired in the PRC, on CCTV (see chapter 5 and 6). I have augmented this study of the telecast materials with interviews that I conducted with Taiwanese journalists and broadcasting directors in July and August 2009, through which I explored to what extent and in what ways these actors relayed or reworked the original discourse within their respective institutional settings.

How, then, did the two stations relay the images that the BOB in mainland China provided, and how did they discuss the proceedings? Watching the opening ceremony on either of the Taiwanese stations is a very different experience from following the proceedings on the PRC's national broadcaster CCTV. CCTV's series of official propaganda statements contrasts strongly with the way in which the CTV and FTV commentators explain the event. The Taiwanese journalists adopt a telecasting format that is similar in style to that of American broadcasters (see Brownell 1995: 33); the journalists speak freely and largely spontaneously, often repeating certain phrases or adding speech particles such as 'oh' or 'uhm', as well as empty signifiers such as 'well' or 'that' (some examples from the CTV and FTV broadcasts include repeated use of 哦, 啊, 啦, 那么, or 那个).

With regard to the discourse, the effect is significant: Taiwanese television seems to provide spontaneous personal observations rather than canned official announcements, and its commentators speak with all the idiosyncrasies that colloquial speech produces. What is more, the commentators on CTV in particular speak almost throughout the entire ceremony, producing roughly twice the number of spoken words used on either CCTV or FTV. Throughout the broadcast, they add a host of background information that viewers of the other channels do not receive, thus disambiguating how the spectacle should be understood.

Both Taiwanese commentaries offer the potential to reinterpret the ceremony in ways that could very well stand in opposition to what the organisers in Beijing had in mind. At first sight, it indeed seems that the Taiwanese reporters are setting their programmes up as counter-discourses. The example of the flag-raising ceremony is again instructive, since audiences in Taiwan received a very different take on this sequence from CCTV viewers. On the pan-blue station CTV, male sports commentator Mei Shengmin (梅圣旻) explains, 'Alright, next the national flag will enter the stadium, and this little friend will sing the Ode to the Motherland'. The station then relays the first eight shots of the sequence (i.e. the first of three minutes), showing the girl as she sings her first verse and the 56 children as they carry the PRC's flag, but then the station abruptly cuts to commercials and does not return to the events at the National Stadium in Beijing until the first arts performance begins. The flag-raising ceremony itself, as well as the PRC anthem, is omitted on CTV.

FTV similarly cuts to commercials. In the footage that the station kindly made available to me, the female commentator announces, 'So, later on we'll broadcast all of the splendid scenes for you — first we'll take a quick break, and then we'll immediately come back'. Yet where the commercial break should be, the footage instead includes a rare glimpse into behind-the-scenes discussions at FTV that the viewers were not privy to. With the microphone still open, the male announcer speaks to one of his colleagues. Only his side of the conversation is audible, but it is possible to infer what the discussion was about:

That's something we don't need to talk about. Actually, we don't need to talk; it's fine to just move forward naturally. Good! Because when we cut to commercials, the musical performance continues. Because I think some of these parts we don't need to narrate, it's fine if they see this themselves.

不用讲这个，甚至我们不用讲话就自然进就好了。好啊！因为他们到时候切广告的时候音乐会直接。因为我觉得有些地方不用讲，他们自己看就好。

As the images keep running, the male announcer starts to whistle along with the PRC's national anthem. The first actual intentional on-the-air statement is then the introduction of the subsequent segment, which starts with the female announcer welcoming the audience back after the commercial break. This intermission suggests that the FTV broadcast team approached the ceremony with a particular attitude: the idea was not to lecture viewers with an ideologically informed interpretation, but to let the images speak for themselves as much as possible. What is more, the fact that the commentator is whistling the PRC anthem suggests that the event struck him as rather casual.

This already hints at a marked difference between the CTV and the FTV broadcasts, and I will discuss additional differences below, but first it is worth exploring a linguistic practice that sets the two Taiwanese telecasts apart from the mainland Chinese broadcast, and that is the use of pronouns. On all three TV channels, the word 'we' (women 我们) is one of the most frequently used words (used 37 times on CCTV, 44 times on CTV, and 42 times on FTV), rivalled only by the use of the words 'China' (Zhongguo 中国; CCTV: 71, CTV: 50, FTV: 41) and 'Olympics' (Aoyun 奥运; CCTV: 32, CTV: 57, FTV: 12). The context in which the pronoun is

used, and how it is juxtaposed with a word like ‘China’, is important here. Whereas the mainland broadcaster CCTV repeatedly uses ‘we’ to refer to the Chinese nation (e.g. ‘tonight, we send out this radiantly glowing peace dove’ or ‘let us make a great effort together to keep our promise and give the world a green Olympics’), the Taiwanese stations use the pronoun ‘we’ alternatively to signify the broadcasting team (‘we saw this earlier at the previews’, ‘we now turn to the next scene’, and so on) or to include the broadcasters plus their viewers (‘we now see...’). The PRC and its audience are not included as part of this ‘we’.

The scene depicting the dream of outer space provides a good example of how the Taiwanese stations instead refer to the PRC, and how they each attempt to position themselves and their viewers vis-à-vis the mainland. This is what the female announcer at FTV says as the segment starts (my emphases):

Ok, coming up next is the Dream segment. What is called a dream here is, as everyone can see, about astronauts. Well, everyone knows about China’s accomplishment of sending the astronaut Yang Liwei into space, so astronauts are relatively important to them during these Olympics. We can see...

好，马上来进行的的就是正式进入到了梦想这个部份了。所谓的梦想大家可以看到就是航天员，那么大家都知道中国在太空的成就航天员杨利伟跃上了太空，所以航天员对他们这次的奥运来讲是相当重要的。我们可以看到现在演员呈现的是在太空当中无重力的状态。

Note that the speaker refers to the PRC as ‘China’ and ‘they’, while reserving the pronoun ‘we’ for herself and her Taiwanese viewers. ‘China’ is constructed in this comment as an actor distinct from the speaker — an impression further enhanced by the use of evidentiality (‘everyone knows’), relativism (‘what is called a dream here...’), and the phrase that astronauts are important ‘to them during these Olympics’. CTV commentator Jian Zhengguang (简政光) makes remarks that are in a similar vein (my emphases):

Now astronauts are appearing in the stadium. This represents the recent link between China and the origins of its so-called space science. It seems that the Chang’e-ben-yue satellite that they

launched into space also is related to this space-flight programme, as are the Mars research projects that they have joined.

现在现场也出现了太空人，这也是表示中国这两三年这近几年来跟所谓的太空科技又有一些渊源在。像他们有在释放了嫦娥奔月的卫星，都是跟太空科技做一些结合。

Again, 'China' is framed as a distinct other in this narration. This practice resurfaces in the CTV commentary whenever the focus is on the PRC as a state, for instance when the commentators refer to Chinese cadres as 'leaders of the mainland country' (大陆国家领导人); in contrast, the pan-green station FTV never uses the phrase 'mainland' with reference to China). In fact, compared to the FTV commentary, the CTV remarks are far more politically charged, for instance pointing out which Taiwanese politicians were attending the ceremony. The commentary on the pan-blue station, in contrast to that on the pan-green competitor, in fact starts out as explicitly critical of the PRC. For example, the CTV commentators begin their broadcast by pointing out how the run-up to the Beijing Olympics was marred by the uprisings in Tibet earlier that year, and how public opinion only gradually become more positive abroad as China suffered the devastating Sichuan earthquake in May 2008. The scale of the opening ceremony also offers the commentators the opportunity to introduce critical and at times derogatory side-notes. Recall the somewhat condescending remark quoted above about China's 'so-called space-science', which calls into question how seriously the viewers should take this space programme. On another occasion, the anchor takes a stab at the population size on the mainland:

The mainland with its population of 1.3 billion may not have much, but it has a lot of people. From the beginning the strategy was to use a mass of people. In a moment, they'll present another 2008 people.

大陆十三亿人口，别的不多，就人最多。一开始人海战术，马上推出了多达两千零八个人。

In short, there is a marked difference in how the pan-green and the pan-blue broadcasters each position themselves with relation to the PRC: FTV constructs a dynamic in which 'China' and 'Taiwan' are distinct units

with a relationship at eye-level. Indeed, as one FTV executive told me in an interview (Taipei, July 2009), it was crucial for the pan-green station to clearly distinguish Taiwan from China, for instance during specific tournaments. CTV, on the other hand, creates the impression of a shared Chinese heritage residing in two distinct states, and it implicitly frames the PRC as inferior to the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan.

7.5 Generating awe among Taiwan's media gatekeepers

The result of these ruptures and incongruencies is that the comments on both FTV and CTV seemingly stand in contrast to CCTV's narrative, which collapses party, state, and the audience into one unit (i.e. the nation) and injects a strong degree of pathos into its commentary. Does this then mean that the organisers in Beijing lost discursive control over the opening ceremony and its meanings as the spectacle was broadcast elsewhere? As it turns out, while the commentaries do in fact include moments of counter-discourse, the Taiwanese broadcasts as a whole largely reproduced the public relations message that the organisers of the opening ceremony built into the event. There were two ways in which this happened.

Firstly, it is apparent from the commentary that the journalists at FTV and CTV were overwhelmed by the splendour they were witnessing. Despite the intentions of the FTV commentators to let the images speak for themselves, and to let the audiences interpret the event as they see fit, the two reporters in fact rarely missed an opportunity to voice their amazement at the opening ceremony. Similarly, the CTV crew quickly departed from initial critical overtones in their reporting and instead provided what is essentially a very dense fan commentary. In both cases, the speakers expressed spontaneous awe (apparent from outbursts such as 'oh' 噢 or 'wah' 哇), described the enthusiasm with which the audience in the stadium were applauding and cheering, explicitly lauded the ceremony and its director Zhang Yimou, and repeatedly referred to the performance as incredibly splendid (*feichang jingcai* 非常精彩) or excellent (*bang* 棒). They were effectively swept up in the entrainment that the ritual produced.

CTV in particular commented in detail on the stage design and the mechanisms behind the performances that viewers themselves could not see, and this commentary was infused with a certain sense of admiration,

suggesting that viewers were witnessing an incredible achievement. Recall the somewhat derogatory CTV statement regarding the mass of performers ten minutes into the opening ceremony, and compare this to the following statements by the commentators an hour later:

He: We can see that these fast synchronous movements by the 2008 performers in the stadium, as well as their formation changes, are really quite difficult to do. When he first spoke of the difficulties that the opening ceremony faced, Zhang Yimou stated that the biggest challenge was the entrance and exit of the performers. How to make thousands of people disappear in thirty seconds while bringing several thousand new performers onto the stage really gave him headaches. What is more, the entrances and exits have to look good on screen, so he had to think up different ways to do this.

Mei: At the end of the day, this is completely different from the film techniques and atmosphere that he has been working with in the past. The changes in a film scene do not happen in the open like on a stage. Yet what everyone now sees on stage is really perfectly ordered and full of splendour.

何：我们可以看到两千零八人在场中快速的错身，而过变化队形，有相当的难度。当初张艺谋在讲到开幕式的困难之处，他就说演员的进场和退场是一个最大的挑战。还有怎么在三十秒之内让几千人场中消失，再让几千人进到这个舞台上，真的让他相当伤脑筋。而且还要让进场和退场之间画面要好看，更是让他想了不同的方式。

梅：毕竟跟他过去指导电影艺术感觉和手法是完全不一样。电影呈现在画面上的大家看到的场景的变化就不像现在是一个开放的舞台，开放的舞台大家现在看到的确是整齐化、色彩炫丽。

Aside from the continuously increasing expressions of awe, there is a second factor that similarly results in the Taiwanese commentators reinforcing the official PRC discourse, and that is the sense of a shared cultural heritage. The segments that showcased pre-modern Chinese history in particular seemed to resonate with the Taiwanese

commentators, leading them to often enthusiastically offer up their knowledge of major Chinese inventions such as moveable type or the compass. A good example is the section on writing, with its strong focus on Confucian-style harmony that I have discussed in chapter 6.

The CTV commentators relay this sentiment when they quote various passages from the Confucian *Analects* and then state that ‘of course China is a country of etiquette’ and that the performance ‘appears to symbolise a continuous stream of culture, flowing through all ages and changes’. What is more, the commentary explicitly reminds the viewers that ‘we’ (in this case: the commentators and their audience) use the same Chinese character for harmony as the one presented in this segment.

It is quite remarkable that none of the commentators place the references to harmony into perspective by mentioning that the CCP leadership adopted the phrase as a cornerstone of its propaganda to establish a ‘harmonious society’. Instead, the female FTV commentator provides a favourable interpretation, remarking how aptly the director uses the symbolism in the opening ceremony:

Well, the reason the character *he* is used is that Zhang Yimou wanted to stress that Chinese culture specifically states that harmony should reign supreme. Yeah, and successive generations of thinkers have repeatedly discussed this concept. This includes the *Analects*, which state: ‘practise the rules of propriety, let harmony reign supreme, and all within the four seas shall be brothers’. The use here is perfect, this is exactly ‘letting harmony reign supreme’.

那么为什么要用「和」字是因为张艺谋想要强调的是中华文化里面有特别说了，就是以和为贵，在历代的思想学者其实一直在反复讨论这个东西。包括论语有说到「礼之用，和为贵。四海之内皆兄弟」。这个作用是恰到好处，就是以和为贵。

The case of FTV is indeed instructive in this context. The commentators repeatedly reiterate, and even praise, the same ‘flat’ myths throughout the opening ceremony that Barmé (2009) has criticised, and that today inform so much of official PRC historiography. It is ironically the pan-green TV station – a station associated with the DPP’s advocacy for Taiwanese autonomy – that relays uncritically the same discourse on Chinese history that the organisers of the ceremony assembled. In fact,

a comparison between the official media guide to the opening ceremony (BOCOG 2008a) and the FTV commentary suggests that the anchors may have drawn heavily from this guide, essentially reproducing the arguments from this manual. Examples include referring to the terracotta warriors as the 'eighth wonder of the world', reframing Columbus' voyage to America as an outcome of the Chinese invention of the compass, or attributing the invention of the kite to the pre-modern philosopher Mo Di.

At other times the commentators go beyond the official press material and introduce their own interpretations of Chinese history and culture, effectively adding to the overall patriotic sentiment that the organisers of the opening ceremony injected into the performances. The following is the FTV explanation of the Great Wall of China, which was emulated and enacted by the performers of the movable typeset:

The Great Wall is one of humankind's historical world wonders, and that includes that all astronauts have said that from the moon you can see Taiwan... not Taiwan, haha... the only man-made structure you can see from the moon is the Great Wall, so that is why Zhang Yimou mixed the Great Wall into the performance. This is the Great Wall that was built 2000 years ago, in 221 BC, when the first Qin emperor united China.

长城是人类历史建筑史上一个大的奇迹，包括航天员都说了，从月球可以看到台湾，不是台湾，在月球唯一可以看到的建筑物就是长城，所以张艺谋就把长城这个东西融合在表演里头。在公元前两千零二一年前的时候秦始皇统治中国的时候所建造的长城。

While I hesitate to over-interpret the Freudian slip in this passage, the error is nevertheless interesting, since it suggests how central the island of Taiwan is to the worldview of the speaker. However, more important are the numerous simplifications and errors that characterise the statement. Contrary to popular belief, the Great Wall is not, in fact, visible from space, and it was built over an extended period of time, not in 221 BC. I suspect that several factors have come together here, effectively prompting the commentators to make questionable statements while reinforcing the PRC's official public relations message of a strong yet peaceful nation with an impressive history of cultural splendour.

Firstly, the commentators are specialists in sports rather than the history or culture of China. They seem to reproduce their common-sense knowledge of Chinese culture, probably derived from schoolbooks and popular culture, and this knowledge draws from historical narratives and cultural tropes that are pervasive not just on the mainland. Secondly, as one FTV programme director explained to me, the journalists were very careful not to offend the mainland authorities with critical comments, since they were worried about future press access. They consequently focused on sports whenever possible while self-censoring potential political comments. Thirdly, as two Taiwanese journalists told me, most reporters considered the Beijing Olympics to be a sports event with no political meaning. It is hardly surprising that the commentators would then not consider the press materials they were using to be expressions of vested political interests. This combination of unfamiliarity with the subject, the need to self-censor, and the unquestioned shared background knowledge together worked in favour of the mainland organisers: not only was the discourse of a strong yet harmonious China relayed to Taiwanese audiences via local TV stations, the discourse was reproduced by believable speakers in accessible and authentic language, lending the resulting message a credibility that the stilted CCTV broadcast would have been unlikely to achieve in Taiwan.

7.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined how various actors outside mainland China assembled the semiotic resources that the networked spectacle of the Beijing Olympics made available to them, and how they used these resources to further their own projects. For the Chinese state and its collaborators, these activities were aimed at 'branding' the Chinese nation, and they frequently related to the ongoing debates within the PRC about how to promote what is often called soft power. This idea of soft power strongly informed the ideological backdrop of China's networked spectacles and their public relations campaigns, but, as I have argued in this chapter, the concept itself has limited analytical value when explaining how such campaigns work. Instead, tracing the interaction rituals and actor-networks in which various actors construct meanings about the spectacle provides a much more fruitful avenue for assessing the power dynamics in transnational mass communication.

In this particular case, several foreign actors were able to insert themselves into near-global media networks and programme their own values into the discourse, drawing on many of the same symbolic resources as the authorities in China. Blending recognisable elements of the official discourse, such actors created statements that at times departed significantly from the official vision of what spectacles like the Beijing Olympics should be about, either commodifying nativist or cosmopolitan narratives for financial gain or creating cultural products that explicitly criticised the Chinese authorities.

Yet, as much as the emergent discourses clashed, there were also instances where the activities of organisers translated into positive messages for foreign audiences that aligned with official Chinese interests. This was true for certain commercial activities, such as the Coca Cola commercial that showed whimsical, animated birds flocking to the Bird's Nest stadium — a cosmopolitan feel-good message that rivalled any that the authorities put on display, and that was to some extent enabled by, and readily usable in, the cultural governance approach that the organisers had adopted. It was also the case that many of the foreign broadcasts of the event relayed the overall sentiments that the organisers had programmed into it, and this was visible on Taiwanese TV, where local gatekeepers were swept away by the impressive spectacle, at least momentarily. The way in which well-planned mass events are able to create 'entrainment' extends to the second-order audiences of journalists and media workers, and in cases where the event organisers are able successfully to fuse the various components of their discourse with the experiences of their audience, the resulting 'flow' can indeed be convincing.

This is not to say that the authorities were successful in their soft-power campaigns. It remains questionable whether the momentary effects of an attractive cultural product or convincing ritual interaction translate into sustainable sentiments that attach to such complicated categories as nation-states, let alone their policies. In fact, evidence from the US suggests that many audiences there experienced heightened concerns about China in the wake of the Beijing Olympics, much like the South Park character Cartman in the scene that opened this chapter. Despite overwhelmingly positive 'feel-good' reporting on NBC, it appears that word-of-mouth and online discussions about cheating Chinese athletes alongside a growing realisation of China's success on the world stage frightened many viewers, leading Gries and his colleagues to conclude

that 'Chinese organizers may have inadvertently contributed to greater American anxiety and wariness towards China' (2010: 230). Such audience reactions notwithstanding, the example of the Beijing Olympics shows how official actors create the vocabulary and grammar of a specific spectacle, how these components then 'travel' through communication networks to shape political discourses abroad, and how carefully managed nodes in these networks can allow the actors to convince others to relay their values through foreign broadcast systems, even as the results may not always be what they intended.

