

4 Staging China's Revival

It is twenty minutes past eight in the evening in Beijing, and millions of TV viewers across the world are tuned in to the opening ceremony of the 2008 Summer Olympic Games. In the recently constructed Bird's Nest Stadium, a little Chinese girl dressed in a red dress takes the stage and sings a Chinese song: the *Ode to the Motherland* (Gechang zuguo 歌唱祖国).

The red five-star flag waves in the wind.
How the song of victory resounds,
Praising our beloved motherland.
Henceforth we shall stride towards prosperity and strength!

五星红旗迎风飘扬，
胜利歌声多么响亮；
歌唱我们亲爱的祖国，
从今走向繁荣富强。

The camera closes in on the scene from a distance and slowly circles round the girl. It then cuts to the stadium floor, where children dressed in the traditional attire of China's ethnic groups carry the PRC's national flag across the stadium. Viewers of the state-run domestic network CCTV are informed in Chinese that 'the air above the Bird's Nest stadium reverberates with the loud praise for our motherland, while 56 ethnic minority children enter the hall, clustered around the red five-star flag'. The camera now switches back and forth between long shots of the flag-bearers, extremely wide angles of the stadium floor (now bathed in red light), views of stadium spectators waving miniature Chinese flags, and low-angle shots of the singing child. The girl launches into the second verse of her song:

Across the high mountains, across the plains,
Across the surging Yellow and Yangtze Rivers,
This vast and beautiful territory

Is our beloved homeland.
 We love peace, we love the homeland.
 Our unity and friendship are strong as steel!

越过高山，越过平原，
 跨过奔腾的黄河长江；
 宽广美丽的土地，
 是我们亲爱的家乡，
 我们爱和平，我们爱家乡，
 我们团结友爱坚强如钢。

The 56 children have reached the far side of the stadium, where they hand the flag to eight soldiers. The men goose-step up red stairs and fasten the flag to a flag pole. An announcement in English, French, and Chinese instructs the stadium audience to rise for the national anthem of the PRC. One of the soldiers throws the flag into an artificial stream of wind, while a 224-member choir of ethnic minority singers performs the *March of the Volunteers* (*Yiyongjun jinxingqu* 义勇军进行曲). As the flag rises, the camera shows the saluting soldiers, the (Chinese) stadium audience, and the CCP Politburo members on the honour dais. Once the anthem concludes, fireworks colour the sky above the stadium red and yellow, while the audience below applauds enthusiastically.

This scene was part of a concerted effort by the PRC's authorities to showcase what the Chinese nation should stand for at the start of the 21st century. Under the leadership of the CCP, networked spectacles like the Beijing Olympics provided various actors with an opportunity to design these festivities in ways that would inject new vigour into conceptual categories like 'the nation' while simultaneously revising past policy strategies and the basis of the party's legitimacy to rule China. China's networked spectacles promised to provide a staging ground for such reassessments and a way to communicate the party's mission to audiences both at home and abroad.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, the organisational practices that shaped China's networked spectacles under the Hu-Wen administration were not governed top down by a single actor, even if they often drew from hierarchical network structures that had served Chinese authorities well in the past. These practices allowed for delegation, cooperation, and negotiation, creating diverse semiotic resources and discursive statements. That said, the authorities had a specific vision for these

spectacles, and their programming activities within the event networks were geared towards relaying this vision through fairly clear discursive statements.

These discourses may have been created by state and party actors whose potential influence on Chinese society is substantial, but I hesitate to call the discourses that these actors generated 'hegemonic', in the sense that they became dominant. It is hard to say how common or widely accepted such discourses really were. What is more, for a discourse to be hegemonic actors would have to create statements that serve the status quo, relay entrenched meanings, and reinforce common-sense assumptions. However, as I show in subsequent chapters, the authorities frequently designed their messages to shift the status quo, alter existing meanings, and *recalibrate* previously accepted knowledge. Terms like 'hegemonic' vs 'counter-hegemonic' do not adequately capture these communicative moves.

In what follows, I will then instead refer to these communication practices as official discourse, that is the collection of statements designed and communicated by actors associated with authoritative political organisations such as, in the Chinese case, the party or the state. Official discourse is ideological, in the sense that it infuses networks with the ideals of political organisations. This can happen indirectly and subtly, and it may not always involve strategic considerations on the part of the actors who are involved. Like everyone else, official actors also draw from available communicative resources, some of which may not comply with the received wisdom of what official ideology should entail. In that sense, not all official discourse is necessarily propaganda (i.e. statements by actors explicitly meant to communicate the position of their political organisation), though moments like the flag-raising ceremony described above illustrate that propaganda played an important role during China's networked spectacles. More often than not, official discourse was less straightforward, frequently inconsistent or contradictory, but always highly creative in how it assembled familiar symbols and tropes into meanings.

Before turning in the next chapters to the many ways in which official actors recalibrated the PRC's official discourses during networked spectacles, for instance by designing nationalist discourses or defining what a 'harmonious society' should look like, this chapter lays the groundwork for understanding this ideological labour. I will walk readers through three core spectacles of the Hu-Wen era: the Beijing Olympics

opening ceremony (2008), the PRC's 60th anniversary parade (2009), and the official Chinese exhibits at the Shanghai Expo (2010). I will discuss each of these events in turn, focusing in particular on how the spectacles were staged, what communicative resources they drew from to compile their messages, and what background knowledge they attempted to activate through their use of specific symbols. The chapter concludes with various cultural activities that flanked the events in the run-up and aftermath. As I will show, the networked spectacles followed a general narrative that can best be summarised under the official propaganda term 'great revival' (*weida fuxing* 伟大复兴), which has played an increasingly important role in Chinese political discourse since roughly 1999 (Zhang 2013).

4.1 The Beijing Olympics opening ceremony

If we accept that Olympic Games are political events, then their opening ceremonies serve as their primary political statement. The Beijing Olympics opening ceremony (CCTV 2008) was indeed such a statement, but not necessarily of the kind that observers outside China had expected at the time. Many foreign commentators had thought the event would be steeped in the tropes and symbols of Chinese communism, and that it would unapologetically celebrate CCP politics. As it turned out, the opening ceremony took a rather different approach, and it is telling that, for instance, journalists reporting for Germany's main state TV channel, the ARD, were then surprised that the event had not, as one broadcaster put it, been 'a propaganda show' (ARD 2008).

It is possible that the lack of traditional CCP imagery and references to political figures such as Mao Zedong or Deng Xiaoping caused some observers to miss the subtler political messages that the organisers staged in Beijing's National Stadium. Under the arguably masterful direction of Chinese film-maker Zhang Yimou, this spectacle managed to tap into both the positive imagination of the international community and the perceived cultural heritages of Chinese viewers to define what 'China' might stand for at the start of the 21st century (see also Gries et al. 2010: 214).

The key focus throughout the opening ceremony was on China as a unified nation with a longstanding history of technical and cultural achievements. As Zhang Yimou and his team unfolded a 147-metre long

scroll in the centre of the stadium, they simultaneously unfolded a vision of China that stretched from the invention of gunpowder to the foundation of the first printing press, from the Han Dynasty's regional trade along what would later become known as the Silk Roads to the Ming Dynasty's nautical expeditions, from terracotta warriors to landscape painting, and from traditional Chinese instruments to modern concert pianists.

History, or rather historiography, has long served Chinese leaders as a justification for present-day politics (Mittag 2009, Weigelin-Schwiedrzik & Schneider 2009): not only do references to past glories instil a sense of pride in domestic audiences, they also place the current leadership in the context of a long line of successes. The opening ceremony utilised such a linear, modernist blueprint to guide viewers through historical achievements that culminated, ultimately, in the first Chinese manned spaceflight.

This linear narrative carried an array of tropes that romanticised Chinese history and culture, and the organisers used extravagant visuals to arrange what the parameters of Chinese 'civilisation' should be today. This included colourful flowing dresses of Tang Dynasty ladies, powerful ancient drum performances, dream-like fairy creatures flying through the stadium, and elegant martial arts routines. These set pieces cleverly evoked patterns of meaning for both domestic and foreign audiences, providing a nostalgic foil of national splendour at home and arguably tapping into orientalist fantasies abroad.

At the same time, the organisers had embedded the glamorous Chinese performances in international values such as peace and respect for the environment that promised to make the ceremony intelligible for foreign observers and give the spectacle a non-threatening tone. The performances ambitiously fused Chinese folklore and modern values, telling a story of national success and harmony through the language of the international mass event.

I will not narrate the entire performance here. Full versions as well as highlight reels are available through major online video streaming platforms such as Youtube, and Barmé (2008) has provided a step-by-step account of the ceremony. I am interested here in the specific communication strategies that the organisers used to present their vision of China in the world. The director's team had set out to 'brand' the very identity of the Chinese nation, and a crucial component of this effort was the way the organisers relied on child actors to tell the story of

contemporary China, a strategy that has long played an important role in CCP propaganda efforts (see Donald 1999: 97).

An example of this is the flag-raising ceremony that I described at the start of this chapter (Figure 4.1). In it, China's ethnic groups are represented by 56 children, who harmoniously hold hands as they carry the national flag across the stadium floor. The message of ethnic unity is not new: the CCP has for decades evoked imagery that shows minority groups united around one of the nation's most revered symbols, the flag. In this case, this familiar imagery has been recast in a way that suggests innocence, an issue I will examine in more detail in chapter 5: the statement about national unity was relayed through cute children holding hands.



Figure 4.1: The Beijing Olympics Flag-Raising Ceremony. Images assembled from screenshots of online footage.

These 56 ethnic groups were united in their effort to carry the flag, but also by the little Han-Chinese girl with her pigtails singing the *Ode to the Motherland* as the other children — reportedly themselves Han Chinese (Spence 2008b), but wearing the traditional attire of specific minority groups — marched across the stadium floor. In her red dress and singing

a revolutionary song, the girl represented both the (Han) Chinese people as well as their communist vanguard. For all intents and purposes, she became the Chinese nation, collapsing state, party, and people into a single symbol. Her role in the ceremony was pivotal, and she would later reappear at another crucial moment, imbuing the event with a recurring theme of youthful innocence that reflected official narratives of national rejuvenation.

The use of children continued throughout the entire ceremony, ensuring that the momentum of cuteness was never entirely lost: in one of the concluding sequences, which was titled 'Starlight' (*xingguang* 星光), internationally renowned pianist Lang Lang was accompanied on the grand piano by a five-year-old girl. Dancers around them formed the shape of a white dove. Later in the sequence, as the dancers arranged their bodies to construct a miniature model of the Bird's Nest Stadium, the girl in the red dress made her second appearance: suspended on wires, she sailed across the stadium, waving at the audience as she was seemingly carried into the sky by a Chinese kite.

In the subsequent sequence, 'Nature' (*ziran* 自然), a group of children dressed up as elementary school students took a mock lesson in environmental protection while 2,008 martial artists performed Taiji movements around them. Towards the end of the sequence, the children used crayons to colour in a traditional Chinese landscape. As the painting rose to the sky, featuring a large smiley face in place of the sun, the children cheered and waved.

Finally, as the performative part of the opening ceremony drew to a close, popular singers Liu Huan and Sarah Brightman performed the event's theme song *You and Me* (*Wo he ni* 我和你) from the top of an artificial globe. Below them on the stadium floor, 2,008 actors opened up umbrellas that displayed the happy faces of children from all around the world. As the performance concluded, fireworks reportedly formed 2,008 smiley faces in the skies above the stadium.

While this use of children is certainly not new in political communication, the organisers here chose to deploy this visual trope to create specific meanings. The trope coincides with distinctly modernist discourses: the children can be viewed as representing China's future, and it is telling that they played a role in sequences that dealt with modernist and contemporary issues such as nationalism, economic development, urban construction, international relations, and environmental protection — themes that I will analyse in more detail in the next chapters. In

contrast, no children appeared during the four sequences that showcased the cultural achievements of pre-modern China (i.e. the invention of gunpowder, paper, the written script, and the compass). We do not see any children playing ancient Chinese instruments or performing martial arts either. This is an interesting way to frame modernity, not just as a linear journey forward through time, but one of 'rejuvenation' (*fuxing* 复兴).

There is another dimension to the use of this trope throughout the opening ceremony, and this dimension connects to a more general shift in CCP ideology under the leadership of Hu Jintao. The laughing children holding hands provide semiotic resources for reimagining modern China as place of harmony. The idea of a 'harmonious society' (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会) was first introduced to official CCP discourse in 2004, during a plenary session of the party's central committee (see China Daily 2010), and together with the 'scientific development outlook' (*kexue fazhan guan* 科学发展观) it subsequently became one of the two core ideological concepts of the Hu era. Both concepts were later written into the PRC constitution, and they remained programmatic throughout Hu's tenure as General Secretary of the party (for discussions see Chan 2009, Geis & Holt 2009, Hong 2010, and the contributions in Zhao & Lim 2010).

In chapter 6, I will discuss in more detail how different actors created concrete meanings for this concept. Here, it suffices to stress a particular strategy through which the opening ceremony organisers made that concept a salient part of the event's political discourse. Throughout the opening ceremony, the performances suggested that harmony was a continuous theme throughout Chinese culture, and that it is indeed central to China's past, present, and future. One sequence was explicitly dedicated to creating this sense of continuity: the segment 'Script' (*wenzi* 文字) showed the evolution of the Chinese character for harmony (*he* 和) from its pre-modern to its contemporary form.

This set-up allowed the organisers to bridge the kind of awkward inconsistencies that Harvey (1996) has criticised in mass events: instead of creating tensions between, on the one hand, a linear, modernist narrative of progressive change and, on the other hand, a conservative narrative of immutable national culture, the segment construed a pure ideal of harmony that remained at the centre of this imagined Chinese civilisation, even as its instantiation took on new forms throughout the ages, adapting to changing circumstances. The press guide to the event

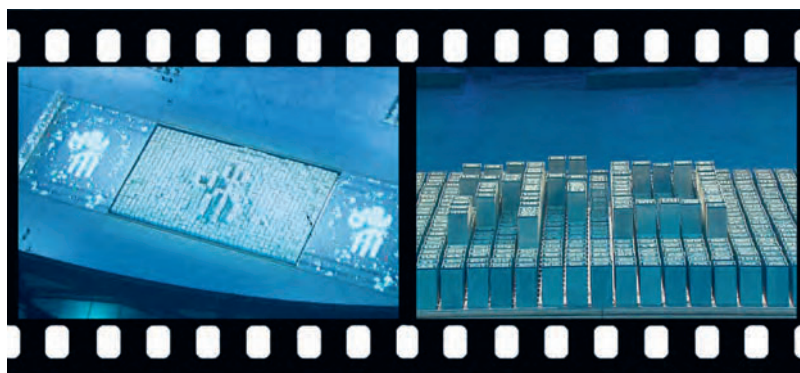


Figure 4.2: The Evolution of the Character 'He' in the Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony 'Script' sequence. Images assembled from screenshots of online footage.

suggests this interpretation in its own explanation of the performance (BOCOG 2018a: 33, emphasis and errors in the original):

This is modern type of Chinese character 'He'. All three words represent not only **the evolution process of Chinese characters**, but also Confucius' idea of humanism, that is, 'Harmony is Precious'.

Before such a backdrop, actors who invoked the concept of 'harmony', for instance the opening ceremony organisers or the Hu-Wen administration, then presented themselves as having merely dipped into a continuous civilisational river to pull out existing concepts, rather than having invented and calibrated such concept as part of their discursive work. Through such communicative choices, the actors involved in constructing political discourses to some extent naturalise the concepts they use and legitimate their meanings through appeals to a supposedly shared tradition. Similar communication patterns were also on display at the networked spectacles that the authorities staged the year after the Olympic Games: the 60th Anniversary of the PRC, in 2009.

4.2 The PRC anniversary parade

The Beijing Olympics opening ceremony was about branding the Chinese nation, laying out a continuous historical narrative for China, and framing the present (and future) through cute children. It was about

the rejuvenated Chinese nation. These efforts continued a year later, at the PRC's elaborate 60th anniversary celebration, though arguably with a more domestic audience in mind. On 1 October 2009, at 10:00 am, the PRC launched a massive televised parade along Beijing's Chang'an Avenue. Nearly 10,000 soldiers and 100,000 civilians would march across Tiananmen Square, past thousands of carefully vetted volunteers and invited guests. Picking up where the Olympic narratives had left off, the event told stories of national unity, harmony, and CCP leadership.

My colleague Hwang Yih-jye and I have analysed the anniversary parade in detail (Hwang & Schneider 2011), and I will limit my present discussion to a description of the proceedings and a study of the core communicative strategies that informed the parade. I will return in the next chapters to some of the themes that Hwang and I traced in our earlier study. My goal here is to show how the anniversary celebrations drew on the iconography of China's revolutionary past, reproducing several rituals that have come to form part of the CCP's repertoire of symbolic interactions, but how the event organisers also juxtaposed revolution-era iconography with new elements, in the process often subtly adding meanings and discursive resources to the established canon of communist signs.

The celebrations began with three generations of Chinese leaders (Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping) walking the red carpet and taking their place on the podium above the famous Gate of Heavenly Peace. Together with other members of the CCP's leadership, specifically the members of the party's highest organ, the Politburo Standing Committee, they then observed the flag-raising ceremony opposite the Gate, in front of the Martyrs' Memorial on Tiananmen Square. Following this ritual, PRC President and CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao proceeded to inspect the troops (see Xinhua 2009d): riding along Chang'an Avenue, China's top leader passed formation after formation of People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers. During this ride, he engaged the troops in a ritualistic exchange of slogans from the back of a 'Red Flag' limousine — a tradition familiar from the previous 13 PLA military parades that the PRC had witnessed since its founding (see Hung 2007, Sun 2001, and Ye & Barmé 2009). The famous exchange has China's commander-in-chief address the soldiers with 'hello comrades' (*tongzhimen hao* 同志们好), and they reply 'hello chief' (*shouzhang hao* 首长好) in carefully rehearsed unison. This line is then followed by a second exchange: 'comrades, you have worked hard' (*tongzhimen xinku le* 同志们辛苦了), asserts the commander-in-chief, to which the soldiers respond 'we serve the people' (*wei renmin fuwu*

为人民服务), an emblematic phrase, dating back to Mao, that captures the party's self-perception and one of its core legitimating arguments (Figure 4.3).



Figure 4.3: The Ritual of Troop Inspection during the PRC's 60th Anniversary. Figure adapted from screenshots of online footage.

After Hu Jintao completed his version of this exchange, repeating the famous phrases ten times, he returned to the balcony at the Gate of Heavenly Peace to give an eight-minute speech that highlighted recent economic achievements, national unity, and the importance of CCP rule. Hu's speech was then followed by the military parade itself, with 14 square formations of soldiers and 30 blocks of top-of-the-line military equipment traversing the square (China Daily 2009), in each case saluting the leaders on the podium in carefully choreographed synchronicity. This display of martial prowess was succeeded by a civilian pageant, which had been prepared by the same director as the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony: Zhang Yimou. The civilian component of the parade included a segment that paraded large portraits of past Chinese heads of state

across the square, framed by famous propaganda slogans. It then showed major achievements in PRC history, covering political, economic, social, and technological themes. Following this sequence of highlights, the parade featured floats for each of the PRC's provinces or administrative regions, and it concluded with displays of ethnic unity and transnational harmony.

Much like the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony, the PRC anniversary parade presented a linear narrative of history that moved from a distant but glorious ancient period through more recent phases of turmoil and humiliation on to a modern present that is marked by renewed glory. The use of symbols was particularly relevant to this endeavour, especially since the pre-modern era was represented only indirectly, through cultural references. Hu Jintao's speech pointed towards this non-distinct past by praising China for '5,000 years of history', a number that will have been familiar to audiences as the official CCP's position on how far back the origins of the nation should be located. The speech linked this mythological past to the idea of rejuvenation that had already played such an important role in the Olympics opening ceremony discourse the year before, with Hu extolling 'the Chinese nation's bright prospect on the road to revival'.

More generally, the parade discourses were at their core modernist, concerning themselves only with the pre-modern past in the form of symbols that suggested a vague, glorious past. References to modernity were much more specific, and symbolic numbers again played an important role in this regard. The soldiers who carried the PRC flag during the flag-raising ceremony took precisely 169 steps up to the flagpole, one for each year since the start of the First Opium War in 1840, reminding audiences of the year that the party leadership considers to be the start of a 'century of humiliation' at the hands of foreign powers. The idea of national humiliation provides an important foil for contemporary Chinese nationalism (Gries 2004: ch.3, Wang 2012), and more specifically for the revival narratives of recent leadership generations (Callahan 2010: ch.2): it was the CCP, so the rationale goes, that overcame this lost century and set the country on its path towards well-deserved glory.

The 60 years of PRC history were then also frequently referred to, e.g. through a 60-gun salute during the flag-raising ceremony, the 60 floats of the civilian pageant, the 60,000 white doves that were released into the sky at the end of the event, but also the licence plate numbers of the limousines used during the troop inspection, which read V-01949 and V-02009 (see

Xinhua 2009f). The event further evoked China's revolutionary past through the PLA orchestra that played famous revolutionary songs, but of course also through the location itself: the Gate of Heavenly Peace had provided Mao with the stage for announcing the foundation of the PRC in 1949, and his portrait still adorns the monument and overlooks the famous site (for a history of the square and its iconography see Wu 2005). The event further pointed towards this founding mythology through the choice of attire that master-of-ceremony Hu Jintao wore for the occasion: whereas the other CCP cadres wore western suits, Hu was dressed in a 'Mao suit', or rather a 'Sun Yat-sen suit', as the attire is known in Chinese. The suit served as a reminder of modern China's Republican heritage, placing the current leadership into a timeline that extended beyond the famous founding date of the PRC and that connected Sun's revolution, Mao's revolution, and the present administration within the overarching theme of China's road to revival.

To fill this overarching narrative with meaning, the event organisers used a number of communicative mechanics that served to frame the proceedings. Aside from building important symbols into the parade, for instance as part of specific floats and formations, the director's team also had the parade pass before a backdrop of volunteers in the square who would flip colourful flashcards, creating a large 'human screen' that could display relevant slogans as the formations moved past (Figure 4.4). For domestic audiences, these slogans and the activities on the square were then further framed by the CCTV commentators, who disambiguated the event and provided the intended interpretation. Through these interlocking mechanisms, the organisers stacked various semiotic markers to shape the political discourse of the parade. For instance, the segment that showcased Mao's portrait was presented as the 'creation of heaven and earth' (the official title of that segment, relayed to audiences through CCTV), and its relevance became enmeshed with the general background slogan that 'socialism is good' (presented by the volunteers in the square). The Deng era, in turn, would become 'the story of spring' (segment title), linked to the background statement 'emancipate the mind'.

Importantly, the more recent periods under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao were presented as a future-oriented transition into the 21st century, with Jiang's formation (titled 'walking into a new era') accompanied by the background slogans 'striding into the next century' and 'proceed with the times'. Such discursive statements may seem vacuous, but they generate the frame through which the organisers then made sense of the Hu

Jintao period, which coincided with flashcard displays of the ‘scientific development’ concept, and which carried the somewhat awkward title ‘carry forward the cause, and charge ahead into the future’. In this way, the organisers of the anniversary festivities attempted to make the most recent leadership generations and their rule over China intelligible to audiences as a new historical stage in a linear progression through time, and as a crucial step towards national revival.



Figure 4.4: Crucial Slogans Framing the PRC’s 60th Anniversary Parade on Tiananmen Square. Figure adapted from screenshots of online footage.

This period would then be filled with new meanings, which I return to in the next chapter. The idea of revival was deeply woven into this ideological work. Much of the remaining parade was arranged to imbue the present with a sense of rejuvenation and, much like during the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony, director Zhang Yimou used the trope of children to bring together various meaning-making moments and create an overarching sense of unity and future-oriented drive (see also Xinhua 2009c). This was particularly evident towards the end of the event. The last floats included an arrangement of ‘young pioneers’ who performed on drums and, finally, a formation of children carrying balloons. During

this final formation, which was arranged around a flower basket and the slogan 'long live the motherland', the volunteers in the square displayed characters that read 'tomorrow will be even more glorious' while a choir of children sang 'we are the future of communism'. The parade concluded with the children releasing their balloons into the air and running towards the Gate of Heavenly Peace, where they waved their colourful wreaths at the leaders in the stands, who waved back benevolently.

This display of paternalistic leadership may seem quaint, but it is part of a wider effort that aims to define such leadership before diverse audiences, in various contexts. At the height of the Hu-Wen period, the CCP was re-imagining itself as a kind of 'Volkspartei', a political organisation that claimed to represent broad interests across the political spectrum and work for a shared common good. It was using the communicative resources at its disposal to set the ideological parameters for its legitimacy. Framed as 'service to the people', the CCP reaffirmed its role as a benevolent parental figure for 'the people', and it tied its mandate to rule China to modernist developmental achievements and the promise of an even better future. The parade served as the staging ground for a particular vision of this future, presented vaguely during the event as bright and glorious, but defined in more detail during the Shanghai Expo a year later, and heavily evoked during the Xi Jinping period through the focus on the 'China Dream'.

4.3 China's crown jewel

At the World Exposition 2010, the hosts enshrined official discourses in a number of state-organised or state-commissioned buildings and exhibits, generally following the script of 'national rejuvenation' that had already governed the meaning-making efforts at the Beijing Olympics and PRC anniversary. The most prominent of the expo's edifices was the iconic China National Pavilion (*Zhongguo guan* 中国馆, see Figure 4.5), also known as the 'Oriental Crown' (*Dongfang zhi guan* 东方之冠), which was flanked by the smaller pavilions of the Special Administrative Regions Hong Kong and Macau. The China Pavilion itself was home to a large, three-part exhibition on 'Chinese Wisdom in Urban Development' (城市发展中的中华智慧, summarised in Chinese in Shiboju 2010), and its foundations housed 31 Chinese regional and provincial exhibits (some of which are presented in *Oriental Morning Post* 2010: 248-303).



Figure 4.5: China's National Pavilion and its Replicas. All images © F. Schneider 2010, except top left (adapted from George Lu 2010 / Flickr / CC2.0). <https://www.flickr.com/photos/gzlu/4991646142>

I return to the main exhibition below, but first the architecture of the edifice deserves attention, since it is already such a spectacular example of political communication in its own right. Commentators frequently focus on the prominent position of the building and its towering shape

(see also my discussion in the previous chapter), but I am here more interested in the symbolic features that the creators embedded in the edifice and the communicative and design choices they made to tell a story through architecture (presented in the design studio's official guide to the pavilion, SCAT 2010).

Thematically, the architectural design follows similar parameters to those that also informed the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony, that is a strong emphasis on harmony and civilisation. The designers present their plans as bringing into unity 'the cosmos and humankind' (*tianren heyi* 天人合一; SCAT 2010: 30), and they tie their endeavours to a similarly linear narrative of the past to the one that also informed China's networked spectacles in 2008 and 2009, describing the China Pavilion as combining 'traditional structures and contemporary deductions' (传统构架, 现代演绎; SCAT 2010: 41). The project's meaning is anchored to pre-modern concepts such as 'heaven' (*tian* 天) and 'harmony' (*he* 和), as well as to selected cultural artefacts from the past. The beams of the building, for instance, use a pre-modern construction technique known as *dougong* (斗拱) brackets, a system of interlocking wooden supports that would tie beams and roofs together in the imperial architecture of, for instance, the Tang and Song dynasties, and famously visible in the Ming-era edifices that form the Forbidden City in Beijing.

The inverted pyramid-like structure of the China Pavilion is also meant to resemble the coronal caps (*guanmao* 冠帽) of dynastic rulers, and as a whole it emulates the shape of an ancient ritual vessel (*ding* 鼎). The architectural team further referred to the lunisolar calendar with its 24 solar terms, which were engraved into the pavilion's facade in traditional seal script. The characters now adorn the building's base and the endpoints of its beams. Through these strategies, the designers have woven elements that they considered part of a Chinese civilisational legacy into the construction, using either pre-modern components like the ritual vessel or the coronation cap as metaphorical models for the structure (hence the term 'Oriental Crown'), or literally using contemporary versions of pre-modern architectural practices in their project.

The building serves as a contemporary symbol of Chinese civilisation, and it interprets this civilisation as being primarily about harmony. The discourse of harmony for instance reappears in the various technologies that the architectural team brought to bear in order to ensure an energy-efficient design: rooftop gardens, natural air conditioning

and plumbing, and environmentally friendly construction materials all imply a harmonious relationship between human culture and the natural environment. Symbolically, the concept of harmony also informs the colour choice for the building. The building uses seven hues of red, which the designers reportedly selected in collaboration with the China Academy of Art, after an extensive colour analysis of traditional monuments like the Forbidden City (ibid.: 76). The four shades used in the roof design are stacked across the structure to ensure that the colour ‘gradually becomes lighter towards the ground, which increases the sense of hierarchy and space’ (并由上到下通过渐变的手法由深到浅, 以增加整体“中国红”的层次感, 空间感) (ibid.: 45). As a whole, these hues then form the colour ‘China Red’ (中国之红), and to the designers they embody the Confucian phrase *he er bu tong* (和而不同), which they translate into ‘harmony in diversity’.

I will return to this phrase and its many meanings in chapter 6, since it is at the centre of official efforts to conceptualise what a ‘harmonious society’ should be. Importantly, the architects embedded their efforts within wider communication practices that imagine Chinese civilisation as a continuous linear narrative of national revival, and they enshrined in their construction two concepts that were crucial to such imaginations during China’s networked spectacles under the Hu-Wen administration’s leadership: civilisation and harmony. These themes were then also woven into the exhibition inside the building.

4.4 A tour of the China Pavilion

The China Pavilion was designed as an impressive discursive statement about contemporary China and its role in the world, and during the Shanghai Expo it housed an exhibition that further developed, showcased, and explained the themes of the event. This exhibition was called ‘Chinese Wisdom in Urban Development’ (城市发展中的中华智慧), and it transposed the discourses familiar from the Olympics and the 60th PRC Anniversary to the genre of the world fair (for an official introduction to the exhibition see Shiboju 2010).

Ascending the towering China Pavilion via its escalator system, visitors would enter the exhibition at the top floor of the building. There, visitors were guided first through the core exhibition ‘The Footprints’ (in Chinese called ‘Eastern Footprints’, *Dongfang zuji* 东方足迹), which

included one of two specially produced feature films. The pavilion cycled through screenings of *The Road to our Beautiful Life* (in Chinese: 'process' or 'journey of experience'; *Licheng* 历程), directed by Fan Yingwei (范英伟), and *Harmonious China* (*Hexie Zhongguo* 和谐中国), directed by Zheng Dasheng (郑大圣). Each film was arranged across three connected screens, allowing the directors to juxtapose different visual elements and present interlocking parts of their films across the front half of the 700-seat auditorium. The films were meant to showcase 'the story of spring' (*chuntian de gushi* 春天的故事), marking the beginning of the pavilion's tour through contemporary China's urban development and, by extension, also metaphorically symbolising the country's start on a journey of national revival.

The film *The Road to our Beautiful Life* presented a highly stylised story of four generations experiencing the rise to prominence of contemporary, urban China. Starting in a pristine rural past, a son leaves his father's ancestral lands to build the New China. He joins a wave of young people who rush across the countryside and gather at a cliff, gazing into the distance at the city that is their destination. The film then presents a number of set pieces, each portraying heroic construction and developmental efforts, and ultimately showing the achievements that these efforts have led to: impressive fictional cityscapes and real-world edifices like the Bird's Nest Stadium in Beijing.

During this period of construction, the young man meets his future wife, and the two have a son. The next part of the film follows the boy growing up: as he runs along a street of adults celebrating what is probably the Spring Festival, time 'flies by' in the form of years, projected as overlays onto the screen. The boy enters a revolving door, and as it turns more numbers fly by. In the cinema, the screens to the left and right of the main action show various achievements throughout China's reform-and-opening-up period. The boy emerges a young man, only to be stopped in his tracks by an event that has become a watershed moment in contemporary Chinese historiography: the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake in Sichuan Province. The young man volunteers to join the relief effort, and at the site of the disaster he meets his future wife, whom he saves from the rubble. They, too, have a son.

The short film concludes with the grandfather visiting his family in Shanghai, travelling on a tourist bus along the Bund in amazement as CCTV headlines pass by in time, again highlighting numerous important achievements of the past years. In the end, the grandfather holds his

newly-born great-grandson in his arms to bombastic music, with his son's and grandson's families each watching him joyously from across the two flanking screens. The camera then cuts to a digital image of a highly developed Shanghai skyline, informing readers that '30 years China' (30 nian Zhongguo 30年中国) has created 300,000 new cities and 300 million new urban citizens. Finally, the point-of-view camera flies through a canyon in a utopian green landscape, arriving at a science-fictional city of glass high-rises that sits atop a gigantic waterfall. A caption reads:

In the future, we will return to the green, we will return to nature.
Our life in the city will become more glorious.

未来，我们会回到绿色，回到自然。我们的城市生活会更美好。

The second feature film, *Harmonious China*, provided a less bombastic vision of modern China, but despite the different filmic and narrative choices, it connected with similar themes (see also Hubbert 2017: 53-56 for an analysis). Following an opening scene in which landscape paintings morph into contemporary Chinese skylines, the film presents its narrative in three segments, each starting with a famous Confucius quotation that is presented on-screen in Chinese characters, accompanied by English translations (see Shiboju 2010: 28-31; the translations and any language errors are taken from the original):

While standing by a river, the Confucius said, 'What passes away is, perhaps, like [t]his. Day and night it never lets up.'
子在川上曰 逝者如斯夫不舍昼夜

The Confucius said, 'The gentleman agrees with others without being an echo.'
子曰 君子和而不同

The Confucius said, 'Follow my heart's desire without overstepping the line.'
子曰 从心所欲而不逾矩

The first segment of the film is built around a Chinese living-room scene that is presented on the centre screen, and that changes over time as

images of everyday life throughout the years pass by on the screens on the left and right: sepia-coloured photographs from the 80s and 90s showing people taking boat rides and buying the first mobile phones, colour images of university graduations, and so forth. The second segment is also constructed around the passage of time, but in this case showing everyday scenes throughout a day in China. Starting at 07:30 am, the film shows people practising Taiji in the morning, a boy marvelling at a window cleaner around noon, a couple getting married in the afternoon, and a Chinese opera performance at night, concluding with a street cleaner sweeping the streets in a night-time park at 11:30 pm. The third segment then rounds out these stories about time. It shows an hour glass and a counter that spins forward through the years, while the images on screen provide a glimpse into China's future. City images are overlaid with animations of plants and butterflies, and the iconography ultimately returns to its trope of the landscape painting that started the film, now showing an animated painting of a futuristic, green city as birds fly by. The entire film is underscored with classic Chinese instrumentation.

These roughly eight-minute-long films set the tone for the rest of the exhibition. They introduced visitors to the central concerns of the exhibit — harmony, civilisation, a linear passage of time, a glorious future — and then released them into the first segment of the exhibition proper, which was called 'Reminiscence'. In Chinese, the exhibition carried the poetic title 'glancing back at time' (*Suiyue huimou* 岁月回眸), interestingly eschewing more common Chinese phrases for 'looking back' (e.g. *huigu* 回顾) and opting instead for a flowery phrase taken from Tang poetry: Bai Juyi's famous 'Song of Eternal Regret' has the concubine Yang Guifei 'glancing back' at Emperor Xuanzhong, setting in motion a tragic love story that will have been familiar to many Chinese visitors from their high-school textbooks. The exhibits themselves were not directly related to poetry or literature, but they combined trinkets from the past decades: much like the sequence in the film *Harmonious China*, the exhibits showcased Chinese living rooms and how they had changed over the course of the previous four decades (Figure 4.6).

The historical retrospective continued in the subsequent section, 'River of Wisdom' (*Zhihui de changhe* 智慧的长河), which contained an ingenious animated version of the scroll 'Along the River During the Qingming Festival' (*Qingming shanghe tu* 清明上河图), a famous painting that depicts the bustling life in a Song-era city generally believed to be the Northern Song capital Kaifeng. The section also featured a series



Figure 4.6: Three Decades of Chinese Living Rooms. The China Pavilion's 'Reminiscence' Exhibition Area. Images © F. Schneider 2010.

of historical artefacts (the 'Crystals of Civilisation', or in Chinese 'civilisational heritage', *wenming chuancheng* 文明传承). Most prominent among these was a piece from the Terracotta Army, the 'Bronze Chariot Number One' (*Yi hao tong chema* 一号铜车马), which was presented as the core 'National Treasure' (*Guo zhi guibao* 国之瑰宝) of the pavilion.

These historical exhibits were followed by a modernist section titled 'Land of Hope', which showcased a field of bio-engineered 'super-green rice', examples of rural and urban tourist sites, and an animated image of an apartment building in which various families went about their affairs 'under the same roof' (*tongyi wuyan xia* 同一屋檐下). These displays of contemporary achievements rounded out the exhibit on the upper floor of the pavilion, and visitors were then guided along a walkway to the second set of installations, passing 98 children's paintings (Figure 4.7) that had reportedly been selected from 5,000 entries into a nation-wide painting competition called 'imagining a new life — future cities and life through my eyes' (畅想新生活 — 我心目中的未来城市和生活; Shiboju 2010: 118).

Arriving on the next floor down, visitors would enter an exhibition that was modelled on theme-park rides, with carriages transporting



Figure 4.7: Children's Paintings 'Imagining a New Life', Displayed in the China Pavilion during the Shanghai Expo. Images © F. Schneider 2010.

passengers along rails through a stylised world of architectural design practices. The exhibit, called 'The Dialogue' (in Chinese: Xunmi zhi lü 寻觅之旅, 'journey of discovery'), connected ancient Chinese designs and practices to contemporary construction projects. Visitors were introduced to pre-modern bricklaying and roofing techniques, to classic window and door designs, and to engineering practices in bridge-building and traffic management. These elements were then presented as antecedents of high-profile construction projects like the Donghai Bridge outside Shanghai or national plans to construct an interlinking highway network.

Leaving the themed ride, visitors would then descend to the final level of the China Pavilion's exhibition space, entering five rooms that each displayed an element of the authorities' approach to sustainable 'scientific development'. This included a 'Warning from Nature' (Ziran jingshi 自然警示) in the form of an installation that dynamically projected

global environmental statistics onto a wall (CO₂ emissions, rising sea levels, changing temperatures, and so on). It also included a ‘Proper Exploration’ of environmental issues (*qun zhi you dao* 取之有道, a term adapted from a Ming-era Daoist text), which consisted of a hall displaying innovations in green energy production, such as wind power, solar power, algae-based biofuels, and smart energy networks. A subsequent section then demonstrated ‘Measured Consumption’ (*yong zhi you jie* 用之有节, again a quotation from a classic work, the Song-era text called *Zizhi Tongjian*), demonstrating technologies and practices for reducing carbon emissions, avoiding plastic waste, and improving recycling practices. An installation about the reforestation of China’s countryside, called ‘Return to Simplicity’ (*fanpu guizhen* 返璞归真, an idiom dating back to Warring States texts), completed the presentation of environmental issues. At the centre of the display floor lay, in a circular room, the concluding segment of the exhibition, called ‘Fountain of Illumination’ (*ganwu zhi quan* 感悟之泉): a garden of lotus flowers, surrounded by walls of cascading water that morphed into various symbols and phrases. Visitors thus left the pavilion in front of a backdrop of expo slogans and China Pavilion exhibition titles, formed by water, and underscored with the sounds of classic Chinese instruments.

Across its three floors, the feature exhibition of the China Pavilion presented a multi-layered story of national revival. This story was told through multiple media, and it combined a complex series of tropes and symbols to imply a continuous movement forward for the Chinese nation — a movement that ultimately led to hypermodern utopian cityscapes in some non-distinct green future. All the while, this bright future was anchored in the past through recourse to selected symbols of ancient wisdom, providing a contemporary take on the idea of ‘making the past serve the present’ (*gu wei jin yong* 古为今用), a famous Mao quotation, but also a sentiment that has shaped roughly a century of Chinese discussions on how to create a native version of modernity (see Dirlik 2011b).

4.5 Framing China’s networked spectacles

I have so far provided a tour through the official elements of the three major networked spectacles that the Hu-Wen administration organised during its tenure. During each of these events, the party, state, and private actors collaborated to organise an official narrative about China’s

role in the world. To this end, they cleverly arranged ritual interactions and deployed available discursive resources across various media types to make their official statements intelligible to diverse audiences, both at home and abroad. However, such activities do not exist in isolation; they are not confined to the events alone, but they require communicative work in the run-up, to prepare the ground for the actual spectacle (see Dayan & Katz 1994), and sustained efforts after the events, to keep the discourse alive through continuous ritual interactions.

The authorities made excellent use of the discursive opportunity that networked spectacles provide: through their influence in Chinese news media, and their ability to infuse cultural production networks with values and incentives, they created a barrage of related reporting that set the stage for the actual events. Internationally, the Chinese authorities deployed official news outlets to create symbolic capital abroad and signal to potential foreign partners that the PRC was open for business and tourism, for instance in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics (Preuss & Alfs 2011). Domestically, Xinhua News Agency inundated audiences with event-related information, for instance about the Shanghai Expo, on which the agency ran more than 2,600 news items in the year before the event, as a query for 'Shanghai shibo hui' (上海世博会) on the news aggregator Factiva reveals. For the national anniversary the year before, Xinhua had released more than 800 items on the term 'national anniversary' (*guoqing* 国庆), and the year before that, it produced nearly 11,000 Chinese-language news items about the Beijing Olympics (*Beijing Aoyunhui* 北京奥运会). This reporting of course also focused on sports and lifestyle issues, but it was frequently nationalistic. As Han (2010) has shown for the Olympic torch relay in 2008, Chinese news media generally flanked the controversies with reports that provided a nationalist frame for China's Olympic ambitions.

Aside from this flood of official news reports in the run-up to China's networked spectacles, the authorities also used public space to prime audiences for the relevance of these events. Some of these activities were arguably banal, such as putting up Haibo statues across Shanghai in preparation for the expo, but recall again the subtle impact that such banal flagging can have on community sentiments like nationalism. Figure 4.8 shows a flower pot that was used in public spaces in Shanghai in 2010, and which resembled the expo's China Pavilion, itself a national symbol (see above).



Figure 4.8: China Pavilion Flower Pot, Shanghai 2010. Image © F. Schneider 2010.

The 60th anniversary was similarly preceded by extensive propaganda campaigns, often infusing public discourse with specific event-related markers and themes. In the Beijing metro, the public service monitors showed messages that citizens had purportedly sent in to voice their congratulations, such as the one I have reproduced in Figure 4.9, and which roughly translates as:

Black-and-white, colour, LCD;
 Hand fan, electric fan, air-condition;
 Land line, pager, mobile phone;
 Warm food and clothing, comparatively well-off living standards,
 harmony!
 The common people's lives change, the country develops with big
 strides;
 A golden age coincides with the Chinese nation's birthday, the
 motherland strides forward with head held high!

I am in no position to assess whether such comments truly came from ordinary citizens. It is at least conceivable that they had been designed by



Figure 4.9: Beijing Metro Display of Citizens' Congratulatory Text Messages during the PRC's 60th Anniversary. Image © F. Schneider 2009.

propaganda workers, considering how closely such comments mirrored both official language and propaganda themes, e.g. the metaphor of the country steadily 'striding forward' through time. Then again, such phrases are so well-known that it is at least conceivable that citizens would use them in messages intended to get public air time. Whoever the producers of these messages may have been, their relentless efforts ensured that public spaces across China were inundated with discursive statements that presented the officially approved themes of China's networked spectacles.

The themes of the anniversary were further developed in a range of official cultural productions that my colleague Hwang Yih-jye and I have analysed in our study of how official actors narrated stories of national rejuvenation at the time (Schneider & Hwang 2014a). This included a blockbuster movie production that retold the story of *The Founding of the Republic* (*Jianguo daye* 建国大业), placing the early Mao years into the

context of national celebrations 60 years later. While the film itself was arguably convoluted, stringing together a series of committee meetings and political speeches, it was nevertheless designed for mass appeal: the film was laced with cameos of famous stars, prompting cinema-goers to see if they could spot their favourite actors among the multitude of Chinese celebrities. This strategy seems to have paid off at the box-office, where the film ranked as the third most popular film in 2009, reportedly raking in 420 million RMB (Douban 2009), which at the time was equivalent to 42 million Euros. It will not have hurt the financial returns that party members were required to watch the film, that the censors blocked foreign blockbusters from screening at the same time, and that state organisations bussed their employees to collective screenings.

Another cultural product that laid the ideological groundwork for the anniversary celebrations was a CCTV documentary series about China's modern history. In six episodes, the TV production covered the humiliations that the nation had suffered at the hands of foreign powers, starting with the Opium Wars, and then narrated the story of China's revival, walking viewers through the achievements under the guidance of consecutive CCP leadership generations. The same subject matter was further developed in a special multi-media opera, titled *Road to Revival*, which was staged at the Beijing Opera House in 2009. Combining tropes from revolutionary opera with contemporary musical and theatre elements, the show provided a highlight reel of important moments in official CCP historiography, focusing strongly on emotive imagery and music, and disambiguating the stylised performances by having two narrators explain each scene through recourse to official language.

Chinese cultural governance thus extended across different media types to generate an official discourse outside the immediate anniversary festivities themselves, and this was also the case a year later, when a plethora of media reports signalled to audiences what themes and symbols would matter during the Shanghai Expo. Chinese public spaces were again saturated with propaganda posters, statues, and public service announcements, and all state media outlets flanked the world fair with updates and reports.

Throughout all three events, official discourses were frequently self-referential; the PRC anniversary parade included two floats that celebrated the Beijing Olympics, and the float symbolising Shanghai already featured a miniature model of the China Pavilion. At the Shanghai Expo itself, Olympic symbolism was part of the official Chinese expo

exhibitions, for instance in the many references to the iconic national stadium in Beijing. Indeed, the edifices erected for China's networked spectacles played an important role in permanently enshrining the legacies of these events in public spaces. By constructing iconic buildings such as Beijing's National Stadium (*Guojia tiyuchang* 国家体育场) and the National Aquatics Centre (*Guojia youyong zhongxin* 国家游泳中心), respectively nicknamed the 'Bird's Nest' (*Niaochao* 鸟巢) and the 'Water Cube' (*Shuilifang* 水立方), the city government of Beijing provided spaces that could easily be used in follow-up events, framed by the symbolism of national success. For instance, to ensure that the momentum of the Beijing Games was not lost, the Chinese state called for a campaign to keep the spirit of the Olympics alive. Under the direction of the Beijing Olympic City Development Association (BODA; 北京奥运城市发展促进会), the authorities continued to organise sporting and cultural events, academic conferences, as well as exhibitions related to the Beijing Olympics in the year following the original sporting event (BODA 2010: 32). A particularly recursive example was a gala concert that the Beijing Symphony Orchestra organised on 6 August 2009 at the Olympic Green, to mark the first anniversary of the Beijing Olympics. The event featured a host of stars performing a total of 22 songs, ranging from Chinese sports anthems to nationalist songs such as *Rejoicing China* (*Huanle Zhongguo* 欢乐中国), the *Ode to the Motherland*, and the patriotic song *Nation* (*Guojia* 国家), performed by Jackie Chan (see also chapter 5).

Much like the Shanghai Expo's China Pavilion, which now serves as an art museum, Beijing's Olympic stadiums have become national symbols in their own right, ready to be appropriated and disseminated by state and non-state actors alike. Both the National Stadium and the National Aquatics Centre serve as tourist attractions, mainly for domestic travel groups. Despite relatively steep ticket prices at the time (50 RMB for the Bird's Nest, 30 RMB for the Water Cube), the Bird's Nest Stadium alone saw 20,000 to 30,000 visitors per day in the first year after the Games, generating roughly 300 million RMB in revenues (Li 2009). What is remarkable is that the two buildings had fairly little to offer the respective visitors. In the Water Cube, tourist groups filed through the corridors of the building and across the stands of the different aquatic sites. In the Bird's Nest, a large screen played promotion videos while visitors tested what it felt like to sit in the ranks, or to touch the impressive steel beams that form the outer shell of the complex. During my own visit in 2009, both sites were filled with busy chatter and the flashlights of cameras,

but they offered no cultural activities or exhibits. In essence, they had become memorials: reminders of the nation's achievements in 2008.

The main activity that both sites offered the tourist visitors was shopping. The Bird's Nest featured a large gift shop that sold a broad range of souvenirs, such as documentaries of the original Games, Karaoke DVDs with the Chinese songs featured during the event, mascots in different sizes, and miniature Bird's Nest stadiums in gold, silver, and as plush toys. Similarly, in the entrance hall of the Water Cube, various vendors sold trademarked Water Cube accessories (Yin 2009): swim suits, key chains, jewellery, and even bottles of special Water Cube water that had allegedly been shipped in from glaciers in northern Canada (Figure 4.9). The national symbols have become brands in their own right and function as part of the replicable series of signs that are so characteristic of nationalist narratives (Anderson 2006: 185). The Olympic sites have not only been turned into places of remembrance, they have been transformed into logos, endlessly reproduced and proliferated through the logic of the market. While this process has been facilitated by the state, it is not under complete state control. The state has created spaces for the consumption of national symbols, and has switched private entrepreneurs into the distribution network of national meanings, but in the end it is the tourist consumers who fuel this industry of nationalism. Hooked by the state-organised networked spectacles, citizens now go on pilgrimage to state-constructed sites to purchase the building-blocks of their national identity, a dynamic that arguably also drives 'Red Tourism' in China more generally (see Zhao & Timothy 2015).



Figure 4.10: Marketing the Symbols of the Nation: Water Cube Water, sold at the Beijing National Aquatics Centre in 2009. Image © F. Schneider 2009.

This illustrates an important strategy of official propaganda at networked spectacles: to establish a repertoire of recognisable symbols that can then be dropped into new contexts to signal national belonging and legitimate the leadership of the CCP. The three spectacles I have discussed here contained elements that promised to serve official actors as long-lasting discursive resources for future propaganda efforts.

4.6 Conclusion

As the discussions above already suggest, official Chinese efforts to stage networked spectacles were marked by a certain continuity, with specific symbols and themes reappearing across all three cases. Discourses about the nation, harmony, civilisation, or sustainable development played a role throughout, and the next chapters will take a closer look at the specific meanings that actors constructed around such themes. Importantly, these themes did not exist in isolation; they were connected through an overarching narrative about China's 'road to revival' (*fulixing zhi lu* 复兴之路), which played a role in CCP propaganda efforts beyond the spectacles themselves. Through their concerted efforts, the authorities ensured that the grounds for this narrative had been properly prepared in the run-up to the events, for instance through cultural products that preceded and flanked the spectacles, and they made sure that the legacy of that narrative would remain visible once the events had concluded. Buildings like the China Pavilion in Shanghai or the Bird's Nest Stadium and Water Cube in Beijing serve as reminders of China's success in staging networked spectacles, ensuring that these moments of national rejuvenation remain ever-present parts of the urban infrastructure, frozen in time.

What, then, were the precise statements that actors made, regarding the official themes and concepts that characterised the road-to-revival story? As it turns out, discursive parameters that the authorities provided through their cultural governance efforts allowed for highly creative ideological work that frequently shifted meanings and recalibrated core concepts, and these activities can tell us much about changing understandings of China's politics at the beginning of the 21st century.

