

8 Fractured Discourses, Idiosyncratic Interactions

It is another hot summer day at the Shanghai Expo, with temperatures surpassing 40 degrees Celsius in the shade. The waiting times outside most pavilions are so long that it takes several hours before visitors can enter the exhibits. I am looking at the impressive line outside the Australian pavilion, one of the most popular attractions. Waiting times are close to five hours. And yet ever more people are joining the queue.

I am meeting with one of the organisers of the pavilion to discuss how the planning for such an exhibition space worked, but also what messages the Australian pavilion meant to communicate to audiences. ‘The message is never delivered by the building. Expos tend to get carried away with the architecture’, he tells me as I ask him about the many impressive pavilion designs at the world fair. What, then, did his design team focus on? ‘Beaches!’ he laughs. ‘And furry animals. If there isn’t a furry animal in the room, you’re doing it wrong. If visitors don’t see those things, they think they’re in the Austrian pavilion’. Esoteric messages and didactic displays do not work, he believes. ‘It’s a bulk audience of multiple millions. You need icons and a base message’. Visitors may be pushing a pushchair through the exhibition, he points out, distracted by a crying child and an aggravated spouse. Maybe they had an evening of bad food, and then they had to stand in line in the heat. ‘These things influence how the message is received as well’.

The Australian pavilion’s core exhibit is straightforward: three children explain to visitors what kind of city they want to live in, and their stories touch on various themes associated with Australia. ‘We’re trying to build a connection between the straightforward elements and subtler messages’. One goal, my interviewee tells me, was to address the misconception that the laid-back beach life in Australia is a sign of laziness. ‘People see the beach but don’t realise at what price this life-style comes. The Chinese perception seems to be “it’s lucky that it’s like that”’.

Instead, we want visitors to ask what had to happen to make Australia beautiful and relaxed’.

We shift our talk to the popularity of the Australian pavilion. Every 15 minutes, 1,000 visitors entered the exhibits. At the end of each day, 50,000 people had passed through the building. I ask why he thinks people get in line in this heat, queueing for several hours. ‘I have no idea why people get in line’, he says, somewhat nonplussed. ‘Nothing is this good’.

This anecdote from the Australian pavilion shows how even pavilion organisers remained sceptical of their abilities to shape the views of audiences at a world fair, and it suggests that the interactions at such a networked spectacle may not easily collapse into readily digestible didactic messages. It is informed by pragmatic observations about what visitors at world fairs do, and the Shanghai Expo certainly contained its fair share of audience behaviour that raises questions about the effectiveness of such spectacles to communicate clear messages to preoccupied or stressed visitors (see Figure 8.1).



Figure 8.1: Expo Tourists. Images © F. Schneider 2010.

Such an assessment stands in stark contrast to the way the Chinese state treated such events. In the previous chapters, I examined how the authorities calibrated the networked spectacles to encourage participants to create discourses and adopt didactic delivery strategies

that would relay the official vision for China's role in the world at the start of the 21st century. While this cultural governance allowed for substantial creativity, often leading to diverse and at times conflicting meanings, it may nevertheless seem as though the overarching narrative remained firmly in place, and that it encouraged a wide range of official and non-official actors to adopt the symbols and codes that the authorities had programmed into the events. In some instances, and as I discussed in the previous chapter, the official discourse even aligned with the assumptions of foreign actors in transnational communication networks, travelling to contexts outside the mainland that had not been governed by the same institutional rationales as Chinese media ecologies.

Despite such findings, there are good reasons nevertheless to remain sceptical of the idea that the official discourses of China's networked spectacles became 'hegemonic'. This chapter turns to the many ways in which carefully planned official discourses fracture, and how they become warped through idiosyncratic interactions. I first take another look at discussions that portray modern spectacles as technologies of mass persuasion, and in particular at arguments that see them as totalitarian simulations that prevent audiences from distinguishing between reality and ideology. Following these conceptual debates, I turn to numerous examples at the Shanghai Expo that illustrate how foreign pavilion organisers challenged what they perceived to be the dominant discourse at that event. Much like the activists' strategies I explored in the previous chapter, such activities were often designed in explicit opposition to the efforts of the authorities. Nevertheless, the world fair provided a somewhat different setting from the international sports event of the Olympics, and at Shanghai's Expo site the various actors had to engage in their communicative activities side by side, each contributing to and at times subverting the meanings that emerged there.

Next, I turn to subtler fractures in the expo discourses, looking at the themed pavilions that the authorities commissioned, which provided diverse assessments of what 'modernity' might mean. These assessments frequently clashed with the official narratives of a beneficial and sustainable Chinese hypermodernity that I discussed in chapter 6. The discursive processes at these themed pavilions already hint at the way that domestic Chinese actors shift official discourses from within the official event networks, but one could argue that these networks are so closely linked to complex transnational meaning-making networks that they are fairly likely to produce divergent discourses. After all, many of

these pavilions were joint ventures between domestic and foreign design studios. However, attempts to reprogramme official Chinese discourses are not limited to such transnational contexts. Similar processes are also in evidence in purely domestic networks, for instance during the 60th anniversary of the PRC. To illustrate this, the chapter concludes with an analysis of how a major Chinese news organisation intervened in nationalist discourses on the day of that specific networked spectacle, and how it adopted the official semiotic parameters in order to shift the discourse in directions that directly contradicted what the authorities had envisaged for that event.

8.1 The hypermodern spectacle: a simulacrum?

As I discussed in the introduction and chapter 2 of this book, a common perception of mass events is that they produce stable, hegemonic discourses, and that the spectacular delivery of these discourses is capable of seducing or overpowering participants with their ideologies. I have mostly eschewed terms like ‘hegemonic’ or ‘dominant’ in my own analysis to avoid suggesting that official discourses become all-powerful by virtue of being official. However, considering how actors like Chinese state officials unapologetically try to use networked spectacles to ‘guide public opinion’, not to mention the degree of effort and resources expended to establish the discourses these actors consider favourable for their own developmental and soft-power goals, it is understandable that critics worry about the power of these discourses. After all, mass events can be occasions for manipulation, and the authorities have made skilled use of this modern genre of mass communication to further their interests.

This worry is compounded by the interactive dimension of many mass events, particularly of exhibitions like world fairs, where visitors enter into elaborate multi-media arrangements, designed to convince them of certain messages (see also my earlier discussion in Schneider 2013a). Mitchell (1989), for instance, has made the argument that the Orientalist representations at the Paris World Fair of 1889 were a ‘labyrinth without exit’ that created perceptions of the ‘world-as-exhibition’. In more recent iterations of the world-fair genre, exhibits have become ever more interactive, and it is telling that a watershed moment in this development was in fact called *Labyrinthe*, a theme pavilion at the 1967 Montreal Expo

that experimented with interactive multi-screen installations to provide visitors with an immersive experience (Expo 67 in Montreal n/d).

Today, interactive installations often make use of advanced digital technologies and game mechanisms to entice visitors, and the perceived intrusiveness of these technologies has ensured that the metaphor of inescapable, labyrinthine mediated spaces remains popular. For instance, Callahan (2012) and Nordin (2012b) both cite their experiences at the Shanghai Expo's Siemens Pavilion as an example of discourses that threaten to trap and co-opt the participants. At the entrance, the pavilion automatically took a picture of each visitor, which was then turned into a digital avatar that would sing the pavilion theme song together with the avatars of other visitors. Callahan (2012: 256) comments that through such mechanisms 'visitors are recruited into the cosmopolitan message of material prosperity'. Nordin (2012b: 114) goes further, arguing that this use (and arguably abuse) of personal images in fact constitutes a violation of the self. In this view, the expo with its interactive technologies is an example of how 'our bodies are more explicitly hijacked by screening, made to do things potentially against our will (and indeed through or in advance thereof), proliferated, taken apart'. She continues (ibid.: 115):

Through these technologies of the world/fair, not only our concepts of spatiality and temporality but also our notions of subject and object are displaced. ... We are copies of copies without original, simulacral avatars in virtual hyperreality.

To Nordin this then suggests that the Shanghai Expo functions as a simulation of the world that is so thoroughly overwhelming that it replaces the real with a perfect facsimile of itself. This is what the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard has referred to as the simulacrum. To Baudrillard (1983: 4) modernity is characterised by an endless cycle of self-referentiality, a system 'substituting the sign of the real for the real itself'. The only reality that subjects still have access to, in such a simulated world, consists of the ubiquitous signs that circulate through communication networks. Baudrillard's 'perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulation' is the Disneyland theme park (ibid.: 23), which seems to have been at least partially inspired by world fairs (ExpoMuseum n/d). Baudrillard writes (1983: 25):

Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America, which is Disneyland. ... Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.

For Baudrillard, Disneyland illustrates how the age of simulation works. It marks the end of all meaning, the end of 'the society of the spectacle' that Debord criticised, 'the end of perspective and panoptic space' that Foucault examined, and 'the end of all dialectic' (*ibid.*: 54 & 70). In this view, theme parks like Disneyland are so absurdly spectacular that they force visitors to abandon any critical view of the world outside the event site. As the simulacrum takes over, 'power is no longer present except to conceal that there is none' (*ibid.*: 46).

This is a provocative way of envisaging the workings of complex, technologically advanced networks of information and communication. Baudrillard famously took his criticism to the extreme when he asked whether the Gulf War in 1991 had actually happened. 'It is not war taking place over there', he argued, since the only access that audiences in the coalition countries had to this event were the videogame-like images of guided missile strikes that were circulated through global broadcasting networks; instead, the event was 'a masquerade of information' that served as 'the disfiguration of the world', Baudrillard argued (1995: 40). Two decades later, Baudrillard's provocations seem prescient, especially as digital media networks enable actors to divorce their politics almost entirely from any concern about facts. The actions of Donald Trump in the US or the Brexit proponents in the UK are viewed by many as symptoms of a drift towards 'post truth' (e.g. Ball 2017 and Levitin 2017; see also the discussion in Madison & DeJarnette 2018).

While I sympathise with critics of hypermediated politics, I nevertheless remain unconvinced that Baudrillard's idea of the simulacrum is the right heuristic device for understanding networked spectacles. One issue is conceptual: as Eagleton (1991/2007: 166) has pointed out, Baudrillard's rejection of ideology and power deletes the agents from the processes of simulation. Just because it is increasingly difficult in complex communication networks to trace who has power

does not mean that power has disappeared altogether. Another issue is analytical: Baudrillardian arguments about the totality of the simulation may be empirically inaccurate. They potentially ignore the many ruptures that mark the discourses of networked spectacles, and they risk misrepresenting how participants interact with each other and the cultural objects of those spectacles. In short, Baudrillard's critique of the simulacrum is certainly an intriguing intervention into hypermodern media ecologies, but it gets agency wrong, obscuring who tries to manipulate whom, and robbing those who are potentially subject to such manipulations of their ability to make up their own minds. In what follows, I show how actors at China's networked spectacles indeed retain their agency, and how they intervene in communication processes to challenge the seemingly dominant ideologies that characterise these events.

8.2 Subversive expo pavilions

An important site of discursive intervention was the foreign national pavilions at the Shanghai Expo. Almost 200 nation-states had hired architects and designers to brand their own nations through the complex processes I discussed in chapter 3, and the resulting communicative practices often challenged the assumptions that informed the expo's overarching message of global modernity as well as the specific statements that Chinese official pavilions and exhibits created about contemporary China. This frequently happened in ambiguous ways. Take the example of the Dutch national pavilion 'Happy Street', which on the one hand presented the recognisable narrative of liberal modernity governed by nation-states. The technologies that the site showcased – water purification, deep-sea salvage, carbon-neutral construction – were conceptualised as progressive, and, importantly, as Dutch. On the other hand, the design team also understood their work as a critique of urban development practices. The structural designer Rijk Blok (2010) explained this normative ambition as follows:

A good street should be a street full of life where people can meet, live, work, eat, play and shop. ... the solution should not be sought in making more gated communities with only apartments, where people only sleep at night, or planning more industrial areas where

people only work during the daytime, or large shopping malls, that will only be empty and unsafe at night. On the contrary, a good street should combine all these functions and offer a variety of buildings and activities thus ensuring a better quality of life: 'Better City, Better Life'.

The pavilion itself then represented the urban street as a twisted number eight (a lucky number in China), looping through the air like a rollercoaster, and clustered with haphazardly juxtaposed and often highly stylised buildings. The entire installation was a madhouse of postmodern design choices that escaped any single interpretation. Architect John Körmeling later won the Dutch Design Award, not just for the pavilion's architectural style, but, as the jury put it, also for 'proving that the Dutch have a sense of humour after all' ('het bewijst bovendien dat de Nederlanders toch gevoel voor humor hebben'; Architectenweb 2010).

An even stronger example of a pavilion that was designed explicitly as a discursive intervention was the Spanish exhibit. The theme 'from the city of our ancestors to the city of our children' allowed the designers to deconstruct the usual linear narratives of modernity that were in evidence at other pavilions by providing provocative reimaginations of what Spanish pre-modernity, modernity, and future might look like. Visitors were first guided through a violent, primordial world of meteor showers and storms, from which they were ejected into a fragmented postmodern present, suggestive of a newborn child ejected from the womb into the harsh light of the world. This interpretation was strengthened by a disturbing centrepiece of the pavilion, a large animatronic baby that confronted visitors with the deepest depth of the uncanny valley. Other controversial elements included representations of the Madrid bombings and animated short videos that promoted a pan-Hispanic transnationalism, arguably in direct opposition to Anglo-American globalisation (the videos were captioned solely in Spanish and Chinese).

As a pavilion organiser at the Spanish exhibition told me in an interview, the designs were explicitly intended to stimulate critical thinking. He explained to me that the team decided early on that it wanted 'to present ideas, not propaganda' through 'an emotional rather than intellectual approach'. In direct opposition to what the team perceived as heavy-handed propaganda on the part of the Chinese organisers, they left the responsibilities for the different installation designs to Spanish artists, allowing them to create their own visions on the theme, without

intervention from the Spanish authorities; an approach that, as the interviewee told me, caused much controversy in Spain.

A particularly revealing example of how the Spanish team tried to reprogramme what they perceived to be dominant themes in Chinese discourse was the design of the pavilion uniforms. In the run-up to the event, the organisers had been disturbed by the way in which Chinese society deployed uniforms and insignia, a practice that reminded them of Spain's fascist past. In response, the pavilion organisers decided that the uniforms at their site needed to embody a non-hierarchical approach to organisation, and they employed the Spanish fashion company Zara to create outfits that would defy Chinese expectations.

It is not my intention here to judge these didactics or to assess how successful they may have been at communicating an alternative vision of the world to Chinese audiences. My point is that many participants in the expo's organisation decided to generate meanings that they hoped would challenge visitors and provide alternative narratives to those on display elsewhere at the site. The Spanish efforts were arguably grounded in an enlightenment understanding of art and culture. Other designers were not as explicitly confrontational in their design choices. The Japan Pavilion, for example, picked up on the harmony discourse within China and related it to Japanese harmony discourses that had accompanied past Japanese expo efforts, for instance in Osaka (1970) and Aichi (2005; see Chiba 2010 for an official position). The pavilion's theme was 'WA – Harmony of the Hearts, Harmony of the Skills', with 'wa' being the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese character *he* (和).

This commonality then allowed the Japan Pavilion organisers to build a public diplomacy strategy that was aimed at promoting harmony between the Chinese and Japanese people – not an easy task in China, where memories of the Sino-Japanese War and the actions of revisionist, nationalist Japanese politicians frequently cause strong resentments. To achieve their goal, the exhibition designer chose a communication approach that stood in stark opposition to the one that the China Pavilion designers chose on the other side of the expo's Asia zone: the Japan Pavilion would tell stories of how 'connections between people' could lead to a 'harmony of the hearts' (Chiba 2010). The metaphor for a harmonious society was a living and changing organism, represented by the building's architecture, which was meant to resemble a large silk cocoon that changed the hues of its purple exterior depending on the natural light outside. Presenting the building as 'organic' provides

a decidedly different discursive framework from the one that Chinese authorities used to make sense of harmonious design, and I return to this contrast below.

Inside the Japan Pavilion, the idea of harmony was explicitly framed in transnational terms: the core installation was a multi-media theatre and film performance that told the story of the Japanese crested ibis, an endangered crane species. The bird became a symbol of Sino-Japanese collaboration: the efforts to reintroduce the ibis to Japan involved Chinese environmentalists and scientists, and it relied on genetically similar birds from the mainland for breeding purposes. Later, the resulting Japanese breeds would in turn be introduced into China, as part of local environmental initiatives. In this way, the ibis serves as a powerful analogy between the concrete, personal interactions of environmentalists and the relationship between the Japanese and Chinese people more broadly, and it is noteworthy that this discourse downplays the involvement of nation-state actors. Instead, it emphasises cultural flows that transcend national borders, whether it is the exchange of birds or of ideas. As one official argued when describing the silkworm shape of the pavilion (quoted in Chiba 2010):

the process of spinning silk thread from silkworms was imported from China, thereby symbolising ties between Japan and China. ... the foundation of culture in Japan originated from China. Those foundations then developed into something uniquely Japanese, underpinned by harmony between nature and humankind and connections between people.

While statements such as these betray a certain nativist conception of culture (which is here ultimately still presented as ‘uniquely Japanese’), they also facilitate cosmopolitan visions of Sino-Japanese harmony and allow the exhibition designers to infuse popular discourses about harmony in China with rationales that do not fit the official PRC position on the concept.

As a final example of such programming activities, consider the case of the USA Pavilion, which I have also examined elsewhere (Schneider 2014b: 109–111; see also Wallis & Balsamo 2016: 40–41 for another discussion). While the pavilion featured unabashedly neoliberal capitalist narratives, not to mention strong nationalist undercurrents, it created a very different discourse about nations and modernity from Chinese exhibits at

the expo, even as it employed the kind of public-diplomacy strategies that American scholars and politicians had promoted as meaningful forms of international persuasion, and that had also informed the soft-power quest at Chinese expo pavilions (see also chapter 7). However, in contrast to China's national pavilion and its exhibition, the US communication approach addressed Chinese audiences directly, in a casual and self-deprecating manner. It suggested to Chinese visitors that authentic Americans from all walks of life respected, and were interested in, China and its people.

This sense of authenticity was cleverly designed, most notably in the arrival hall of the pavilion, where visitors were shown short impressions from the US as they waited to enter the first of the pavilion's two film theatres. The short scenes showed Americans trying to say a simple greeting in Chinese, equivalent to 'hello, welcome to the US Pavilion' (你好, 欢迎光临美国馆). The diverse set of people stumbled through various comical mishaps, accompanied by light-hearted music, until they finally managed to get the difficult pronunciation right. This short film then set the tone for the rest of the pavilion: whenever US officials appeared in the subsequent feature film, they directly addressed the audience in Chinese before explaining in seemingly casual yet rhetorically refined ways what the pavilion stood for. The first film at the pavilion started with Hillary Clinton, then the Secretary of State for the Obama administration, addressing her audience like this:

Ni hao! I'm Hillary Clinton, and it is my great pleasure to welcome you on behalf of the American people to the USA Pavilion at Expo 2010. As you explore the pavilion, you will see core American values in action: diversity, innovation, and optimism.

The quotation already illustrates how the pavilion presents the US as a community of shared values, an approach to nation-branding that differs markedly from official Chinese attempts to construct the PRC's national image primarily by referring to a shared history and fate. The rest of the US Pavilion's first feature film expands on this theme, demonstrating the 'core American values' by showcasing ethnically diverse boys and girls who explain their dreams of a green future. These whimsical statements about fantastic technologies are juxtaposed with images of real-world technologies that promise to fulfil these science-fictional dreams (wind energy, solar energy, projects to create affordable housing). They are

further contextualised by talking-head commentaries from the pavilion's various sponsors (representatives of Chevron, Habitat for Humanity, PepsiCo, and so on), who demonstrate that the youthful optimism of these children extends to American captains of industry and leaders of civil society. The message is up-beat, suggesting that America represents endless possibilities and is driven by entrepreneurial teamwork and a deep-seated appreciation of pluralism. In the film, these impressions are finally brought together by former US president Barack Obama in a concluding speech:

Ni hao! Congratulations to the people of China and Shanghai for hosting this remarkable world expo, which speaks to China's rise as a strong, prosperous, and successful member of the community of nations; a nation that draws on the strength and creativity of its people. Welcome to the USA Pavilion, where we are proud to showcase the spirit that has always defined us as Americans; a nation of immigrants from all corners of the world, working together with a sense of community and common purpose to overcome adversity, and a sense of possibility and optimism that the future is what we make it, that we can build a better life for our children. Of course, these are not simply American qualities, as I said when I visited Shanghai last year. We are bound by our common humanity, and our shared curiosity. This includes the hopes we share with the people of China, and the people around the world, to work together to realise a healthy, sustainable and prosperous future. Thank you for visiting us today, and on behalf of the American people, we look forward to being your partner, and hopefully someday welcoming you and your families to the United States of America.

I have quoted this passage here in full because it contains two crucial discursive moves that generally characterised the communication strategy of the USA Pavilion. The first was to present liberal individualist values as foundational to US national identity, and the second was to then subtly try to naturalise liberalism as universally applicable. In the Obama speech, this is apparent from the strong, liberal-democratic understanding of 'community', which is then explicitly sold as self-evidently universal.

The exhibition followed this pattern throughout. It was imbued with a strong liberal discourse, which implied that the problems of the planet

could be solved by individuals through creative optimism. The second feature film, called *The Garden*, represented this argument in the form of a heart-warming story of a community that comes together to improve the environment. The communication approach could hardly have been more different from the one that informed the bombastic feature films at the China Pavilion: in *The Garden*, a young girl tries to create a community garden in the backyard of her bleak apartment block. To this end, she elicits the aid of her neighbours, who are each comically different individuals with their own strengths: a hulking bodybuilder, an old immigrant, a black hardware store owner, a group of street kids, and a Chinese lady. After a series of setbacks, the members of this community realise that they can overcome adversity by each contributing their diverse personal strengths to the project and working together. Close-up camera angles, a confined mise-en-scène, and a folksy acoustic guitar song all create a sense of intimacy.

The strong liberal messages were then packaged in ways that were meant to connect specifically with Chinese audiences at a personal level. In numerous cases, the feature films and the commercial exhibits in the final hall of the pavilion featured Americans of Chinese ancestry or presented the stories of successful Chinese immigrants to the US. One commercial display, for instance, cleverly presented the 'old hundred names' (*laobaixing* 老百姓), the common Chinese surnames that in China also serve as a metaphor for 'common people'. Zooming in on individual characters, the video installation would then show famous American citizens who shared that specific last name. In another case, commercial advertising featured a Chinese woman using an oversized brush to paint calligraphy, emulating a scene from the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony. In this way, state and commercial actors in the US tried to use their access to the communicative network of the world fair to programme the discourse of that spectacle with liberalist values, using Chinese cultural tropes to anchor their ideology within existing discourses in the PRC.

8.3 Modernity revisited

It was not just foreign national pavilions that creatively reworked the discourses of the world fair. Particularly intriguing sites of semiotic assemblage were the official theme pavilions (see also my earlier analysis

in Schneider 2013a: 7-12). These five pavilions were examples of the kind of cultural governance outcomes I discussed in chapter 3: they had been commissioned and approved by the Chinese state, but they had not been designed by the Chinese propaganda department. Instead, the authorities relied on a wide range of domestic and foreign actors to put together these core exhibitions, often collaboratively, and for the largest part these actors indeed retained creative control over their projects.

This is not to say that the five pavilions were divorced from official propaganda narratives. In fact, two of the five pavilions were organised by official actors, and they indeed closely followed the scripts of China as a hypermodern, harmonious civilisation, effectively connecting with the narratives of other official exhibits like those in the China Pavilion. An example of this was the Pavilion of Footprints (*Chengshi zuji guan* 城市足迹馆), which had been created by the Shanghai Museum 'to explore the footprints left in urban history to bring out the wisdom of human civilization', as the official guidebook to the theme pavilions puts it (Xu 2010: 76). It contained cultural artefacts from around the world that illustrated how cities evolved throughout history, giving it an arguably transnational dimension, but overall the narrative of the exhibition was firmly rooted in a dichotomy between 'East' and 'West', with every achievement outside China juxtaposed with a domestic example. Local urban-planning precedents were envisaged as part of a linear national narrative, as elements in 'a 5000-year history of wonders and shocks', as one exhibit was titled. The pavilion also reproduced the 'harmonious society' understanding that the Hu-Wen administration preferred, with one exhibition space featuring a large character for 'harmony' that then became contextualised by the statement that 'society needs order and government' to flourish.

Another example of a themed pavilion that reproduced the official Chinese discourse was the Pavilion of City Being (*Chengshi shengming guan* 城市生命馆), a joint venture between the China Central Academy of Fine Arts and the London-based design consultancy Land Design Studio that mostly told a straightforward story of modernity and progress. Visitors were guided through large halls that featured, for instance, a stylised railway station, an underground sewage system, and the physical infrastructure of an electrical system. They were then shown five short films in a 360 degree cinema, each introducing a particular city plaza and the unique 'spirit' (*jingshen* 精神) that infuses that space: the passion of the Tango in Buenos Aires' May Plaza, the energy of street musicians in

Nairobi's Freedom Plaza, the bustle of Bombay's Railway Square, and the elegance of Edmonton's City Square. The Chinese contribution was Wenchuan Square in the city of Hanwang, which witnesses the tear-jerking story of a young boy searching the rubble of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake for his dead father's chess board (Figure 8.2). The film was meant to encapsulate the 'enlightened, tough, and self-reliant' character of this earthquake-stricken Chinese city (豁达坚韧与自强不息; translation in the original film; see also Xu 2010: 51).



Figure 8.2: Feature Film at the City Being Pavilion – A Boy Commemorates his Father, Who Died at 14:28 during the Sichuan Earthquake. Image © F. Schneider 2010.

While these exhibits generally promoted the nationalist and modernist discourses that informed official statements across China's networked spectacles, they were not without ruptures. The portrayals of pipes and cables in the Pavilion of City Being situated these displays of modern urbanism in a somewhat different context from the exhibits about urban systems in the China Pavilion that I discussed in chapter 6. Instead of adopting a mechanistic understanding of such systems, the designers of the City Being Pavilion used the metaphor of a living organism to portray the city. The exhibit was called 'Circulation System: Experiencing the Metabolism of the City' (循环管道: 经历城市代谢, translation in the original); as the guidebook explains, it was meant to 'make people better understand the complexity and vulnerability of the city as an organic living being and the relation between its different components' (the Chinese text is phrased slightly differently, but to the same effect: 人民在行进中, 既经历通道, 也能得到城市生命系统有机运行且脆弱关联的信息, 这些都值得人们对城市生命健康展开思考; Xu 2010: 46-47). This discourse still lends itself to statements about the progressive power of modernity and its technologies, but it

also complicates such statements by tapping into discourses of organic organisation, which imply a wholly different axiom for understanding modernity from the one suggested by mechanistic discourses. As one scholar of organisations has put it, ‘mechanistic organizations seek to maximize efficiency and standardization’ whereas ‘organic organization seeks to maximize satisfaction and development’ (Lunenborg 2012: 6). It is an open question whether the curators of these exhibits were trying to make such a paradigmatic statement about mechanistic versus organic urban organisation (see Hage 1965: 305), not to mention whether visitors would have appreciated such a statement and its implications. However, it is intriguing that a core pavilion designed at least in part by official actors would depart from Taylorist and Fordist understandings of organisation on display elsewhere and opt instead to creatively open up discourses about harmony and scientific development that moved in different directions.

Other theme pavilions departed even more markedly from official discursive frameworks, at times providing spaces for alternative imaginations about modernity that could be interpreted as the types of ‘utopian enclaves’ that Jameson (2007: 15-16) has discussed: spaces ‘within which Utopian fantasy can operate’ and in which participants in the interactions might adopt ‘a kind of mental space in which the whole system can be imagined as radically different’ (Jameson 2007: 15-16). The Urban Planet Pavilion (*Chengshi diqiu guan* 城市地球馆), for instance, envisaged the future of urbanism in ways that contrasted markedly with the hypermodern skylines amid green jungles that many official Chinese pavilions presented. The German designers Triad Berlin whom the authorities had commissioned to create this environmental showcase opted for a dystopian approach that featured imagery of urban sprawl, scorched earth, and polluted seas (see Triad 2010 for impressions). To present its critique of how urbanisation depletes resources and harms the environment, the designers chose to adopt the harmony discourse that the authorities had flagged in their own communication practices, embedding their narrative in references to ‘ancient Chinese philosophy’, specifically the harmony between the traditional five elements of metal, wood, water, fire, and earth. The guidebook explains in English and Chinese (Xu 2010: 64-65):

They [the five elements] respectively interpret what has happened to mineral resources, natural environment, water resources,

energy and waste treatment. Overpowering images show urban development undermines people's living environment, and sound an alarm that urban sprawl will wreak havoc on the Earth.

在这个展区，设计者借用五行的符号，以震撼人心的图像和实物表现城市发展带来的人类生存环境的多方面恶化，告诫人们，城市不加节制的蔓延和过度发展的后果可能是地球的毁灭。

This message about the danger that unchecked urbanism poses to 'harmony' was juxtaposed with images of children from around the world, along with bilingual information about their likes and dislikes, their hopes and dreams. Each of the exhibits concludes with the child's answer to the question 'what would be different in the city of your dreams'. Visitors thus learn that five-year-old Bastet from Cairo would like his city to smell better, that four-year-old Emil from Berlin would like there to be more space for animals, that five-year-old Gabriela from Mexico City would like her dream city to be filled with trees, and that twelve-year-old Xu Junhao from Shanghai would like there to be no cars but only forest – hardly an endorsement of 'China's love affair with the car' (Watts 2011) and its impact on urban environments (Zheng 2017).

Granted, the Urban Planet Pavilion also engaged in a fair bit of capitalist solutionism, for instance presenting a 'Road to Solutions' that consisted of low-carbon construction techniques and green energy technologies often designed by (German) multinational corporations. However, the pavilion rejected the interpretation that capitalist modernity would simply fix itself, as exhibits in the nearby China Pavilion suggested. The concluding showpiece of the exhibition was a film titled *The Only Planet We Have*, which aimed to illustrate 'how mankind [sic] existed in balance with the earth for a very long time, and how this relationship ended up in its present fundamental crisis' (Triad 2010). The film's iconography arguably constructed a romanticised vision of nature that contrasted with scathingly critical images of industrialisation, but whatever one might think of the exhibit's ideology and didactics, it did not jell with official discourses in China where the problems of economic development can be solved with more economic development.

The same could be said for the way that another pavilion reimagined global modernity: the somewhat awkwardly named 'Urbanian Pavilion' (Chengshiren guan 城市人馆). The authorities had employed the Dutch

exhibition architects Kossmann.dejon to design the exhibition, and the team opted for an up-close and personal answer to their guiding question ‘what is the quality of life?’ (for an official introduction, see PICNIC 2011). The pavilion told the stories of six families from cities on six different continents (Melbourne, Phoenix, Rotterdam, Sao Paolo, Tema, and Zhengzhou). In non-linear, non-hierarchical installations, the exhibition juxtaposed footage and information about the six families, inviting visitors to identify with their journeys through a representative cycle of everyday life (see Figure 8.3). Visitors would first enter a wax figure cabinet that contained a diorama of each family along with an introductory video about the family members and their respective home city. In the subsequent halls, the exhibition presented five elements of urban life: home (*jiaju* 家居), work (*gongzuo* 工作), connectivity (*jiaowang* 交往), learning (*xuexi* 学习), and health (*jiankang* 健康). Each hall combined personal artefacts and looped video installations of the various individuals going about their routines, often synchronising the short films to suggest that the members of the different households are engaged in similar activities at the same time, across the six continents.

It may then seem as though the exhibits construct a linear narrative of modernity, especially considering how strongly the exhibits use watches and clocks as devices to frame the everyday narratives. Nordin (2012a: 241) has for instance criticised the pavilion for creating a ‘sequentialization in time’ that she argues portrays some families as more advanced than others: ‘we all do the same thing; it is just that some are a bit behind’. Nordin is right to point out that the expo featured ‘clocks, ticking pendula, and hourglasses’ to repeatedly enforce stories of progress through time, but I hesitate to draw the conclusion that the Urbanian Pavilion provided an easy judgement of the families it portrayed. I have placed footage from the various video instalments on a time-line and have compared the imagery and captions to check whether the organisers framed the narratives to prompt conclusions about who might be more ‘advanced’. While some families indeed use more advanced gadgets, e.g. an electric toothbrush in the case of a Dutch entrepreneur, I have not found a sustained effort to use such signs as aspirational markers. In fact, in the introduction to the various households, the families are portrayed during their leisure activities, with the American family playing table tennis, the family from Ghana playing pool, the Brazilian family meeting for a picnic, the Australian couple watching TV at home, the Chinese family meeting for dinner, and the Dutch entrepreneur working



Figure 8.3: Synchronous Everyday Life: Rotating Screen Installation at the Urbanian Pavilion. Images © F. Schneider 2010.

long hours. If anything, there seems to be subtle critique embedded in these depictions, suggesting that the kind of high-octane single life of a Dutch upwardly mobile man is no better (and possibly worse) than the social activities of families in Africa or South America.

Any ostensible endorsement of linear modernity that these video installations might contain ultimately breaks down when confronted with the video captions. Throughout the videos, the designers introduce random facts and statistics about the different life-styles, and so the visitors learn that three minutes of work in Rotterdam buys one

hamburger, whereas eight minutes of work are needed in Zhengzhou. They are informed that the Dutchman works 80 hours per week and spends 40 per cent of his income on housing, whereas the Chinese man works 50 hours and spends 20 per cent of the family income on housing. It seems to me that the designers are setting up various discursive interventions to highlight for visitors that 'quality of life' can take many forms, and can at times remain elusive, even in contexts that might be viewed as 'developed'.

8.4 Fractured visions of the future

Much like the other theme pavilions, the exhibition that was explicitly dedicated to showcasing visions of future cities did not fit into official discourses of hypermodernity. The Pavilion of the Future (*Chengshi weilai guan* 城市未来馆), which had been designed for the authorities by the Spanish design agency INGENIAqed, featured installations by foreign and Chinese artists, and it presented multifarious science-fictional imaginations of future urbanism. As with many other exhibits, some of the pavilion's discourses remained grounded in the familiar stereotypes and problematic assumptions about 'East' and 'West' that are so common at world fairs; Callahan (2012: 255-256) has rightly criticised one installation at the Pavilion of the Future for telling a highly gendered and Orientalist narrative of American or European men and their Chinese wives. At the same time, many of the exhibits complicated such reductionist narratives by constructing provocative utopian discourses. The pavilion designers flagged their utopian ambitions early on, in a hall called 'Dreams and Practices' (*mengxiang yu shijian* 梦想与实践) that paid tribute to important utopian writers such as Thomas Moore, Charles Fourier, and the Chinese philosopher Guanzi (管子). They also welcomed visitors with video installations playing clips from iconic science-fiction films in the section called 'Dreams of Yesterday' (*zuori zhi meng* 昨日之梦), for instance showing scenes from the films *Ghost in the Shell*, *Moebius Strip*, *Immortal*, *The Island*, and *Metropolis*.

The pavilion also featured various avant-garde art pieces that resisted simple modernist interpretations. It showcased nine sculptures, each speaking to a core concept that the designers associated with urban modernity: a peaceful life (*anju* 安居), perfection (*wanmei* 完美), networks (*wangluo* 网络), city planning (*chengshi guihua* 城市规划), basic necessities

(jiben xuqiu 基本需求), nature (ziran 自然), sustainable development (kechixu fazhan 可持续发展), opportunities (jihui 机会), and harmony (hexie 和谐). The artworks were frequently ambiguous, taking no clear position on the issues they represented, but instead prompting visitors to derive their own meanings. For instance, the idea of ‘networks’ was translated into a set of interlinking tubes, the concept of ‘city planning’ was represented by a huge anthill, and the sculpture for ‘nature’ was a gigantic Taihu stone made out of stainless steel. In other cases, the sculptures were more explicitly subversive, for instance when ‘basic necessities’ were represented by an over-sized toilet, or when ‘sustainable development’ became a scale that had to balance a skyscraper against a tree, suggesting to visitors that one might come at the cost of the other. The sculpture for ‘harmony’ provides another powerful example of how different actors repurpose official watch words: the artwork consisted of colourful silk strings that formed a dazzling display of constantly shifting colour and light. The artwork avoided any sense of hierarchy or closure, which arguably created a very different sense of harmony from what popular Confucian interpretations had made of the term at the time.

These at times bizarre interpretations of urban concepts were followed by what was probably the most scathingly critical artwork in the pavilion: the ‘Fantasy City’ installation (*Huanying chengshi* 幻影城市). It consisted of a block of junk that had been suspended from the ceiling, and that was lit in such a way that the discarded refrigerators, televisions, stereos, and car parts cast a shadow on the wall that resembled the skyline of a hypermodern city (Figure 8.4). Reminiscent of Plato’s cave allegory, in which inhabitants of a cave do not have access to reality but only to the shadows it casts, the artwork confronted visitors with the illusion of a utopian cityscape, only to reveal to them what that vision is actually made of: a pile of garbage. The guidebook presents a similar interpretation in its Chinese description (Xu 2010: 110, my translation):

On the one hand it is city rubbish, on the other hand it is a fashionable city, but which one is truly real? This work, titled ‘Fantasy City’, seems to warn people: as we pursue urban development, and as science and production achieve ever greater successes, we are also destroying our own living space.

一边是城市垃圾，一边却是摩登城市，哪个才是真实的存在，这个名为幻影城市的作品，仿佛在提醒人们：在追求城

市发展过程中，在技术和生产取得巨大成就的同时，我们也在破坏着自身的生存空间。

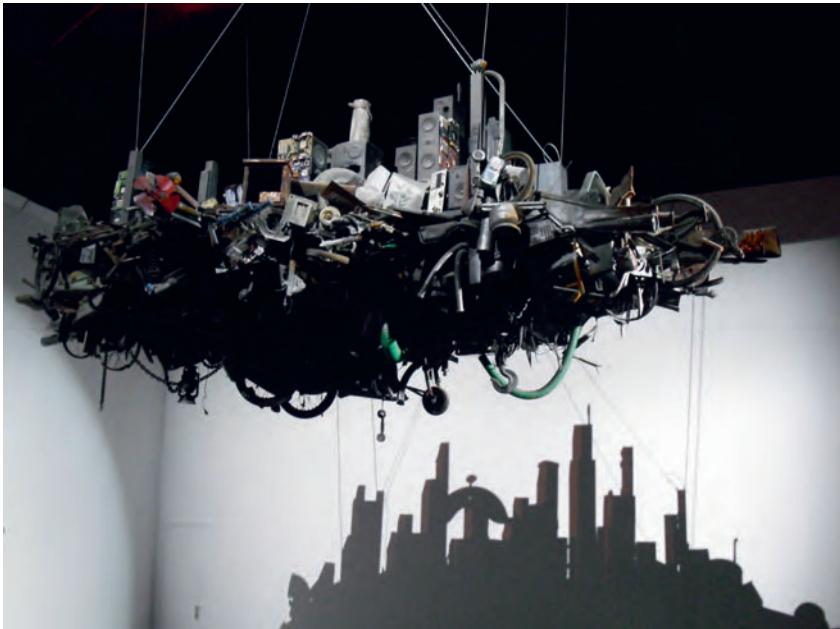


Figure 8.4: 'Fantasy City' Artwork. Image © F. Schneider 2010.

After this vision of a fractured modernity, visitors were guided through a hall that contained dioramas of successful urban-planning examples (showcasing Ningbo, Freiburg, Dar Es Salam, and Canberra), as well as the video of the future wedding that Callahan has commented on. Finally, the tour reaches its feature installation: a utopian vision of five different kinds of cities, designed by the Chinese animation artist Bu Hua (卜桦), and showcased in a hall titled 'Harmony Plaza' (*Hexie guangchang* 和谐广场). The cities were each presented through short FLASH animation films that were projected onto a large screen.

The choice of artist for this centrepiece of the pavilion is already telling: in 2008, Bu Hua had created an animated film called *Savage Growth* (*Yeman congsheng* 野蛮丛生) that provided a psychedelic critique of Shanghai's urban development. In the short film, Bu Hua's alter ego, a little girl dressed in the uniform of a Communist Youth League young pioneer, tries to protect the creatures of her fantasy world against sinister

war planes. As she searches for the origin of this blight, she discovers two hollow statues that are battling each other in a match of who can mass-produce the largest number of modern artefacts like fighter jets. As she observes the two combatants, they each start churning out iconic buildings from Shanghai's Pudong skyline, until they ultimately destroy each other, leaving behind a smoking urban landscape.

For the pavilion videos at the expo, Bu Hua also deploys her alter ego, this time accompanied by a group of children who travel through five different utopian cities: Eco City (*shengtai zhi cheng* 生态之城), Energy City (*nengyuan zhi cheng* 能源之城), Water City (*shui zhi cheng* 水之城), Space City (*taikong zhi cheng* 太空之城), and Intelligence City (*zhizhi zhi cheng* 智慧之城). These cities consist of minimalist, open spaces that are sparsely populated but in which the inhabitants live in close connection with each other and nature. The final instalment, Intelligence City, is particularly critical of industrialist modernity: in the film, the children and their animal friends are confronted with acts of environmental destruction, such as deforestation and industrial waste (Figure 8.5). In one case, a tank ploughs across a field, crushing plants with its tracks. Only Bu's alter ego is able to turn back time with her magic flute and bring the science-fictional cities from the other videos into synchronicity, thus saving the planet. This is a very different depiction of the future from the one that Chinese officials were drawing up at the time.

What are we then to make of the expo's official Pavilion of the Future? I believe the exhibition is best understood as a utopian space, 'an imaginary enclave within real social space' (Jameson 2005: 15) in which audiences entertain possibilities, no matter how radical (see also Geuss 2010: 131). It is a space that encourages visitors to blend all manner of inputs into fantastic speculations about the future, providing an experience of creative thinking and potentially critical reflection.

It is important to recall that the mechanisms of conceptual blending do not force specific understandings on actors by virtue of providing specific input spaces. Experiencing the installations at the Pavilion of the Future, or the expo more generally, is not the kind of simulation Baudrillard (1983) envisaged. Mediated experiences such as visiting the multi-media exhibitions at the expo theme park do not abolish reality. They encourage analogies, prompting our minds to take one input space, such as our conception of the international world order, of harmonious co-existence, or of modern cities, and then blend the information from that space with a second input space, for instance our conception of



Figure 8.5: Overcoming Industrial Modernity with Bu Hua's Science-Fictional FLASH Animations. Figure adapted from screenshots.

a theme park, of futuristic space travel, or of a pile of rubbish. What emerges is a complex structure of meanings that is more than the sum of its parts and that has its uses as actors experiment with the insights that these mental exercises provide. However, this blended space still retains its link to the inputs: subjects are capable of distinguishing between the blend, for instance the meanings they attribute to their experiences at the Shanghai Expo, and its inputs, for instance the actual international order and theme parks like Disneyland. What is more, visitors are able to assess the ontological value of each of these units and reflect on their meanings.

This is why a theme park like the Shanghai Expo does not function as a simulacrum. The extravaganza does not force visitors to mistake ideologies outside the expo as unequivocally real because their 'reality principle' has become confused through exposure to an explicitly artificial spectacle such as a world fair. Instead, the utopian spaces of the Shanghai Expo allow those who interact in them to entertain a fantasy and to play out various creative impulses, while simultaneously being firmly rooted in the real world. In this sense, and despite the constraints that the Shanghai Expo Bureau had set in the interest of the Chinese state, the networked spectacle nevertheless enabled the designers of themed

pavilions like the Pavilion of the Future to create highly imaginative science-fiction visions of the future, just as it allowed visitors to enter these visions and creatively explore their possibilities.

8.5 How one state media conglomerate revisited nationalist discourse

The discussion so far has illustrated that while China's networked spectacles offered propaganda specialists the opportunity to carefully define their vision of global modernity and China's role in it, they also offered other actors the chance to reprogramme official discourse in line with their own values. The way that the official theme pavilions went about telling their subversive stories of human connection and environmental consciousness was a case in point. Also, as Callahan has shown (2012), various intellectuals and artists used the occasion of the expo to get involved and create their own political statements, often in opposition to those which the authorities had created. However, such activities were not limited to multicultural collaborations or artistic interventions during transnational events like the expo, which arguably facilitated multifarious interactions and fragmented discourses by virtue of the open-ended cultural governance framework that the authorities used to manage the affair. Attempts to reprogramme the discourses of China's networked spectacles also extended to non-official actors during events that had a more domestic focus, and this was visible during the PRC's 60th anniversary.

In chapters 5 and 6, I showed how official actors used the anniversary creatively to revamp CCP ideology, but I side-stepped the question of how other domestic actors participated in these endeavours. An intriguing case of how such actors reappropriated official frameworks of meaning for their own purposes was the example of state news conglomerate Southern Media Group and its front-page reporting on the day of the anniversary. As mentioned earlier, Chinese news generally adopted the recurring tropes of nationalist discourse to appeal to readers and sell their narratives about the nation's 'birthday', but not all publications simply toed the party line. Many drew from the nationalist discourse only to tell divergent stories, for instance problematising the environmental and social costs of China's networked spectacles.

To appreciate these activities fully, it is important to recall that China's news media industry is overwhelmingly in state hands, and even private outlets have to work within the complicated state-administered system of licences and regulations, ensuring that no media organisation is entirely able to side-step the influences of the CCP's propaganda system. That said, the Chinese news market is extremely diverse (see Stockmann 2012 and Zhao 1998, 2008), and journalistic agendas and methods vary widely, even among the state-owned conglomerates. The result is a news environment that features official propaganda next to tabloid-like current affairs news and hard-hitting investigative journalism that has to work within the constraints of China's political norms (see Repnikova 2017 for an analysis).

The Southern Media Group (南方报业传媒集团) is a famous example of a state-owned news organisation that produces fairly liberal content, including articles that can at times be highly critical of the authorities. The group is built around the official party paper Southern Daily (Nanfang Ribao 南方日报), but like most state-owned media conglomerates (see Zhao 2000) it draws most of its commercial revenues from its tabloid and weekend editions: the popular Southern Metro Daily (Nanfang Dushibao 南方都市报) and the intellectually-minded Southern Weekly (Nanfang Zhoumo 南方周末). Both are excellent examples of the strategies that domestic Chinese actors use to intervene in political discourses without triggering the state and party censorship system.

Take the front page of the Southern Weekly on 1 October 2009. That day it featured only a single article (Guo 2009), titled 'Let every Chinese person also stand up!' (让每个中国人都站起来!) – a reference to the phrase 'The Chinese people have stood up' (中国人站起来了), famously but possibly erroneously attributed to Mao Zedong (SCMP 2009). The article is oddly ambiguous. It uses a strongly nationalist and at times militarist rhetoric to extol the great progress that the PRC has made since its foundation, especially in terms of securing the people's livelihood. However, halfway through, the text suddenly shifts gear, departing from the familiar script about the state and party's ability to ensure common developmental rights. Instead, the text starts promoting liberal civic rights. The article can be read as a strong critique of Maoist politics, and of the official nationalist discourse about the nation and its human rights record, and yet this interpretation is not explicit. It has to be inferred by reading between the lines, and by situating the seemingly hyperbolic

endorsements of the article within the context of the paper’s well-known liberal editorial stance.

The article is accompanied by an image that is worth closer analysis (see Figure 8.6). It shows the outline of the PRC’s territory, including Taiwan, but formed by a mountain range or the mouth of a grotto. The red sky features the sun next to a cloud formation in the shape of the numeral 6, together forming the number 60. Along the ‘eastern’ edge of the map, a person is abseiling along the cave wall. The image is accompanied by the tag line ‘it is possible to look back, but not to turn round’ (可以回顾, 不能回头).



Figure 8.6: Southern Weekly Imagery of the Nation on 1 October 2009. Image adapted from ccmccm1988 (2009).

Several meanings are extractable from this set-up. If readers opt to use the patriotic official discourse about the anniversary as the frame for understanding this analogy, then the analogy between the cave and the country becomes a positive story of national renewal: the climber is emerging from a dark cave into the light of a rising sun to then potentially stride into an optimistic future. However, if the reader pays attention to a number of subtle cues in the image, then a different frame can be applied to combine the two input spaces: that of satire.

In such a reading, the climber is rappelling into the cave as the sun sets above, descending into the darkness of China's revolutionary past. Cues that prompt such an interpretation include the deteriorating or decaying font that the graphic designers used to render the caption, the title of the article below, and possibly also the way the rope is fastened to the wall and to the climber (indicating a downward movement, rather than a climb). Once readers make this connection, additional features on the page come into focus as part of an overarching criticism of contemporary Chinese politics. For instance, the number '6' divides the country into an eastern and a western part, evoking the substantial developmental differences between these regions; the climber is attached to the prosperous eastern coast, which is also where the sun is located. Another subtle feature is the way in which the table of contents is rendered on the page, using as bullet points the graphic design of a voting ballot, implying a connection with democratic electoral politics.

The Southern Media Group's other two core publications also designed their front pages in ambiguous terms (see Figure 8.7). The party paper Southern Daily features as its central image a picture of a crowded shopping street, decked out in Chinese flags. Again, a simple patriotic interpretation is available, but the fact that patriotism is here juxtaposed with neon signs and advertising also places Chinese revolutionary imagery in an awkward relationship with the symbols of capitalist consumption. The Metro Daily similarly presents readers with resources for multifarious meaning-making activities. It featured a series of three images showing the Gate of Heavenly Peace in Beijing at different moments in time (1949, 1970, and 2009), creating a seemingly linear progression through time that at first sight reproduces the official discourse on modern progress. The headline reads 'Tiananmen, Witness the Republic Growing Up' (天安门, 见证共和国成长). Again, a conventional, mainstream interpretation might associate these images with the same modernist narrative of progress that the authorities were promoting during the

anniversary. However, several elements on the page signal a more critical understanding of the passage of time.



Figure 8.7: Visual Discourses on the Front Pages of the Southern Daily (Top) and Southern Metro Daily (Bottom) on 1 October 2009. Images adapted from Jiang (2009).

Note how the images of Tiananmen are not, in fact, arranged linearly, but rather in a circular pattern, opening up the idea that history might repeat itself rather than move ‘forward’. The choice of dates is also telling: the designers could have picked numbers at exactly 30-year intervals, but instead the second image marks the height of the Cultural Revolution, which is still a taboo topic in Chinese public discourse. Finally, while the

contemporary image of Tiananmen is cast in splendid gold light, it is noteworthy that it is a night-time image that features a dark, even gloomy sky; the image is also completely devoid of people, making the set-up a highly impersonal affair. Again, no single interpretation inevitably emerges from these elements, but the design gives readers the space to blend the possible meanings in various ways, opening up potentially critical interpretations of Chinese history and politics.

These examples show how actors critical of official narratives redeploy the watch words and watch signs that the authorities use in their own propaganda to subtly intervene in nationalist discourses, but without stepping outside the parameters of what China's censors find acceptable. In fact, these actors cleverly play with the parameters of mainstream discourse to maximise the chance that their intervention will enter the PRC's networks of political meaning-making. Consider the sequence of decisions that unfolds as such an ambiguous news item reaches the respective censorship office (see Figure 8.8).

The censors will either recognise the satirical message or they will miss it. If they miss it, the article is published. If the censors recognise the critical thrust of the discursive statement, there is always the possibility that they may secretly concur with the message, even if it is politically unacceptable. The ambiguity of the media product allows such censors to turn a blind eye and let the piece be published, safe in the knowledge that they can later deny having understood the subversive message. In that situation, the journalists have cleverly given potential allies in the censorship system an excuse to endorse discourses they would otherwise need to block from entering China's mass media networks. Finally, if the censors recognise the potential criticism and disapprove, they have to make a difficult choice: block the news item and possibly create a scandal (in which case their actions may actually end up drawing more attention to the offensive discourse) or let the item pass. Again, the ambiguity gives the censors an excuse to feign ignorance and let the critics prevail.

Granted, the example of Southern Media Group reporting on the day of the 2009 national anniversary provides only a snapshot of programming practices in Chinese media networks. It should also be pointed out that the discursive horizon of this particular media organisation has shrunk significantly since the organisation was entangled in a censorship scandal in 2014, severely harming its reputation and at the same time allowing conservative Chinese censors to expand their efforts to bring controversial reporting in line with the CCP's official agenda.

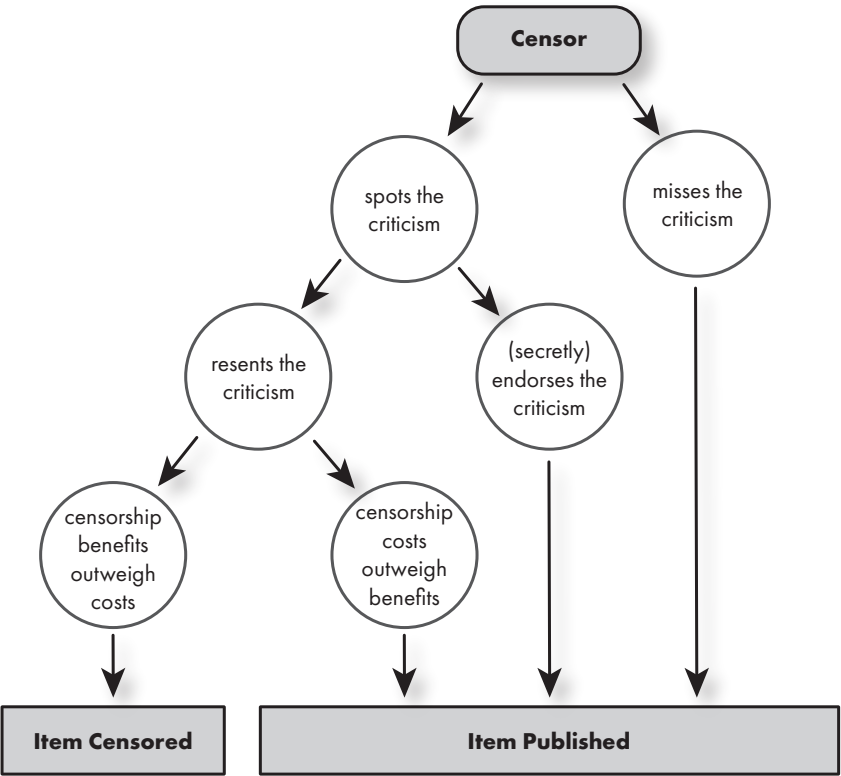


Figure 8.8: The Censor's Dilemma: Judging Ambiguous Political Discourse in Chinese Media. Image © F. Schneider 2019.

Nevertheless, the examples I have discussed here are meaningful, since they demonstrate how Chinese discourses can be reprogrammed from within domestic media networks during a crucial networked spectacle. Even a carefully planned and calibrated national anniversary provides opportunities for actors to fracture, fragment, and generally complicate political discourses.

8.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined different ways in which the discourses of China's networked spectacles became fractured. Despite the efforts of official actors to pull together various discursive strands into a convincing narrative of the modern Chinese nation, the cultural governance

approach that the authorities adopted also relied on actors that did not necessarily share the same agenda as the party or state. The Shanghai Expo was a prime example of how both international and domestic actors went about creating new meanings that departed markedly from the official discourses visible in China's national pavilion. This sometimes meant challenging the official narratives intentionally and explicitly. At other times, it meant subtly shifting the discourse or programming networks with values that promised to unhinge the rationale behind official meaning-making processes, for instance when mechanistic understandings of modernity were reinterpreted through the use of organic metaphors that suggested entirely different conclusions about what social organisation and 'harmonious' living might entail.

Frequently, these subtle reprogramming activities took place within the parameters of official semiotic systems. In the run-up to spectacles like the PRC's 60th anniversary, Chinese propaganda officials and media workers had created symbols for the occasion, developed new frames of understanding, and recruited existing frames into their meaning-making processes. These resources then became available to a multitude of actors as they generated their own discursive interventions. The clever manipulations of China's 'galaxy of meanings' among Chinese newspaper journalists is a case in point, but such activities also extended to interactions in television, across social media, in art galleries, urban planning exhibits, and many other contexts. The multifarious affairs that emerged during these interactions thus defy understandings of semiotic activities as a simulacrum, that is an inescapable machine of circular signification that denies any chance for actors to exert agency over meanings.

What is more, the collaborative and subtle ways in which actors programme meanings during networked spectacles also complicate theoretical arguments about discourses as struggles between those who dominate and those who resist. Such struggles surely take place, especially where actors directly confront certain discourses with antagonistic counter-discourses, but more often than not the process of making political meanings is subtler. Actors collaboratively move discourses along and steer them in different directions, but without any one actor having the power to dictate where the meanings will go.