

9 Conclusion: The Legacy of China's Mass Media Events

It is 30 July 2017, and the People's Liberation Army is celebrating its 90th anniversary. In Inner Mongolia, top-of-the-line military equipment and crack troops are lined up along a dusty tarmac strip at the Zhurihe Training Base. An all-terrain vehicle with licence-plate number VA-02017 is driving past the neat line of uniformed soldiers. In the back stands Xi Jinping, dressed in camouflage fatigues. 'Comrades, you have worked hard!', he calls from the back of the vehicle. 'We serve the people!', yell the soldiers in unison (NCTV 2017). Barely a month earlier, Xi had conducted a similar ceremony in Hong Kong, to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the territory's return to the PRC in 1997 (see CNTV 2017). Dressed in a classic black Sun-Yatsen suit, he was driving past rows of soldiers, armoured vehicles, and attack helicopters, exchanging the well-known phrases with his troops. The ritual continued for about 20 minutes, until Xi reached the end of the line-up. Then China Central Television cut to a reel of images from around Hong Kong: a PLA soldier hugging a child, a PLA soldier helping an old lady across the street, people cheerfully applauding during a PRC flag-raising ceremony.

Two years earlier, Xi was also driven past PLA formations, greeting the troops and assuring them that they had worked hard, but on that occasion his Red Flag limousine had headed east on Beijing's Chang'an Avenue, the same route that his predecessors had travelled during past ritualistic troop inspections. That year, in 2015, the occasion had been the 70th anniversary of the end of the War of Resistance against Japan, now a national holiday on 3 September. As Xi was circling back towards the Gate of Heavenly Peace, his ride past the tanks and troops was accompanied by the well-rehearsed CCTV commentary familiar to viewers from other official events, with the narrator explaining how the technologically advanced armed forces illustrated the revival of the Chinese nation and its prowess as a Great Power, which would use its weapons to secure domestic borders and safeguard world peace (CCTV 2015).

The parallels between these festivities (Figure 9.1) and the PRC anniversary eight years earlier are striking. Indeed, despite the frequent arguments that Xi Jinping's administration has broken with many of the principles that seem to have informed his predecessors' rule, the mass communication strategy under Xi continues many of the earlier practices. This was also visible in 2016, when the G20 summit in Hangzhou was accompanied by a grand opening ceremony that took many of its cues from past occasions like the Beijing Olympics. The event was again designed by Zhang Yimou, who has become China's resident spectacle director. At the time of writing, it remained to be seen whether he would also direct the opening or closing ceremonies of China's next prestigious networked spectacle: the Beijing Winter Olympics that are scheduled for February 2022.



Figure 9.1: Xi's Parades. Images assembled from screenshots of the CCTV, Xinhua, and CNTV broadcasts.

Throughout this book, I have argued that mass events are an important component of what Gluck (2011) has called 'modernity's grammar'. They allow actors to showcase their modern credentials, they have profound transformative impacts on the host cities, and they promise to serve as vehicles through which elites communicate their ideologies to the much-evoked 'masses'. At the same time, I have suggested that we update our understanding of such events, better to capture how they serve as part of networked politics. Throughout this book, I have made the case

that 'networked spectacles' are all about interactions and connections, and that this is relevant at three levels: firstly, such spectacles are sites where participants engage in chains of ritual activities (Collins 2004) through which they 'assemble the social', as Latour (2005) would put it; at this micro-sociological level, the networked spectacle unfolds all of its complexity and reveals the many idiosyncratic ways in which actors attribute meanings to each other and the objects they encounter, and it reveals how group sentiments and collective background knowledge can emerge from these networked activities. Secondly, networked spectacles create 'local' sub-networks that resourceful actors connect to wider, often transnational communication and interaction networks. At this macro-sociological level, diverse actors may switch themselves and each other into webs of meaning-making to programme discourses and push certain rationales onto their recursive interactions. Finally, like any complex communication process, meaning-making at spectacles like Olympic Games, world fairs, or national commemorations invites actors to blend networks of signs into new discourses (Fauconnier & Turner 2002). The meanings that emerge at this psychological level are not easily managed, even though official actors continuously try to guide them in directions consistent with their political agendas.

As a result of these networked interactions, authoritative discourses often emerge as seemingly 'hegemonic' assemblages of ideological statements, containing forceful claims about the nature of the modern world and the status of different people in it. The spectacular, multi-mediated communication practices at networked spectacles can make the subsequent narratives seem inescapable; they may even appear to drown out reality with barrages of free-floating signs, as Baudrillard (1983) would probably have suggested. As these signs proliferate, often with nearly global reach, actors that were not originally involved in the event's 'local' context on the ground become linked into the networks as second-order and third-order audiences (Rauer 2006), and they spread the event discourses even further through their own interactions. However, contrary to what Baudrillard would suggest, these multifarious interaction chains allow actors to reappropriate the semiotic resources that authoritative agents like states and corporations have designed for the event. At times, audience members and participants indeed adopt and endorse the meanings that organisers programmed into their events. At other times they reject those meanings in favour of new associations. They juxtapose available input spaces of meanings to blend them

creatively into innovative ideas, and they feed those ideas back into the networks, effectively reframing and reprogramming the discourses in distinctive and sometimes wildly eccentric ways.

In China, networked spectacles have become part of the ruling party's repertoire of modern mass communication technologies, and this has had both organisational and ideological implications. In this concluding chapter, I revisit several of the core findings of this book, and I relate them to more recent communication politics under Xi Jinping's administration, a government that has been criticised as reviving the most authoritarian practices of China's past and forcing discursive interactions into carefully controlled spaces. While the discursive horizon in China has arguably shrunk under Xi's administration, I want to suggest a different interpretation, and a different assessment, of these processes. My argument is that Xi's administration is continuing many of the practices that its predecessors established, often in technologically refined ways, but that this then also leads to the familiar multifarious interactions that generally characterise the cultural governance of networked spectacles and that do not readily collapse into a singular discourse.

9.1 The CCP's networked approach to power

At the start of the 21st century, China's networked spectacles served the authorities as important catalysts for national and urban development, and they became occasions for state agents to unleash the powerful transformative effects of this genre of modern politics. This included the infrastructure development projects that accompanied these spectacles in cities like Beijing and Shanghai, but also plans to develop tourism, commerce, foreign trade, and to some extent civic institutions in the form of volunteer work. In this way, China's networked spectacles affected millions of people and left a permanent mark on urban landscapes, for instance in the form of expansive metro networks, new airport terminals, and iconic sports complexes.

Aside from these material effects, the events also offered the administration opportunities to experiment with organisational and communication techniques, and to hone their abilities to conduct ideological work. Continuing the CCP's tradition to view itself as the guarantor not just of material progress but of spiritual wellbeing, the party and state refined their efforts to guide public opinion, and they brought

the party's propaganda system into the new century. This propaganda system has indeed come a long way since the mass-mobilisation and thought-work strategies of pre-reform China (see also Brady 2008). The system still retains some of its 'top-down' structure; it is headed by leadership groups at the centre and reaches down hierarchically into all levels of administration and across all parts of the country. However, the CCP's propaganda experts have long discovered that their didactic messages only work if they are appealing and entertaining. As the national symbolism of the Beijing Olympic Games shows, propaganda in today's China does not so much attempt to control all facets of meaning rigidly. Instead, it tries to comprehensively frame communication processes in a way that allows certain interpretations rather than others. This also means that the state has loosened its monopoly over cultural expressions. It has allowed a network of social, political, and economic actors to contribute to the rich tapestry of meanings in contemporary China.

This process of generating meaning is no longer an act of straightforward governing, but is best described as 'cultural governance', a term I have borrowed from Callahan (2006) and Shapiro (2004), and which I have here interpreted as a collaborative effort between state and non-state agents to regulate the discursive contexts in which political interactions take place. These agents all feed their own understandings of society and the meaning of being Chinese into the networks of contemporary China. China's networked spectacles are a prime example of how these cultural governance activities work. They illustrate how actors insert themselves into existing international and domestic event circuits, switch themselves and others into organisational practices, and at times create new networks to manage event-related activities. During the Hu-Wen era, the consequence was that various forces continuously negotiated the meaning of Chinese modernity and of the nation's identity. Throughout all of this, state agencies and party institutions remained in a strong position to shape these negotiations, prompting a large number of diverse non-state actors to assemble cultural artefacts and still generate surprisingly consistent discourses.

The organisers of the spectacles assured these outcomes through their networking activities and through their efforts to create a shared galaxy of signs that contributors were then invited to use in their own communication practices. Many indeed did. In this sense, the CCP and the Chinese state updated what it meant to be 'powerful' in a rapidly changing network society (Castells 2009) such as China. The authorities

retained their substantial switching power, that is, the ability to include certain actors in the process of meaning-generation, while excluding others. They further exerted significant programming power: through various media and in various modes, the authorities injected selected symbols into communication processes and ensured that these symbols were arranged in ways that relayed unambiguous and highly emotional messages. Finally, the authorities tied the various messages together by supplying a specific set of codes that situated them within the broader discourse; a discourse for which audiences had been primed through long-term exposure, and that authoritative actors 'flagged' as the relevant frames for the ritual interactions that unfolded during China's networked spectacles.

As Collins (2003: 61) has pointed out, 'some groups have more resources for carrying out their rituals than others', and 'these ritually privileged groups have more impressive symbols and fill their members with more emotional energy'. China's ruling elites were precisely such a 'ritually privileged group', able to position themselves at crucial nodes in communication networks and manipulate both material and ideological incentives to align the interests of many different actors with their own. This level of power was particularly evident in cases where the authorities could rely on diverse actors to share similar background knowledge and the seemingly 'banal' symbolism that encapsulated that knowledge during ritual interactions. In such instances, actors frequently reproduced the discourses that the authorities had 'flagged', for instance prompting participants in China's event networks to unapologetically sell the nation as a core component of personal identity-maintenance or promote neoliberal capitalist production and consumption patterns as common-sense features of modernity.

The fact that these ideological positions and the assumptions that inform them are not unique to the Chinese context but are flagged in other societies as part of the kind of global 'Euromodernity' that Dirlik (2011a) has discussed, only made the overall narrative more compelling, both domestically and abroad. In cases where actors were able to fuse the symbols of recognisably local and global modernities, they generated the kind of flow that allowed these blends of meaning to travel transnationally, as was arguably the case during international events like the Beijing Olympics and the Shanghai Expo.

9.2 China's cultural governance: learning to live with fragmented discourses

Nevertheless, the fact that the state retained a strong position within networked spectacles should not be mistaken for an indication that the discourses that emerged from these networks necessarily collapsed into unified, stable grand narratives. In fact, even among official actors the meanings of core concepts like harmonious society or scientific development were matters of contention. Some official actors tried to programme the discourses that surrounded such concepts with conservative, nativist meanings; others tried to construct cosmopolitan rationales that implied very different conclusions.

The cultural governance paradigm that the authorities deployed further ensured that the discourses were open to contributions from non-state agents, such as celebrities like Jackie Chan, NGOs like Amnesty International or Reporters Without Borders, domestic enterprises like news organisations or volunteer groups, and large multinational corporations like McDonald's, Nike, Coca Cola, and many more. At times, the messages that these various agents relayed to their publics indeed tied into the official discourse, for instance when Jackie Chan blended the concepts of 'home' and 'nation' to call on all Chinese to love their country, or when Coca Cola sold the idea of a benevolent China in its commercials. However, at other times, the complicated arrangement of symbols that these actors produced sat awkwardly next to the discursive activities of the authorities. Jackie Chan, for instance, has famously offended citizens in China's capital with his nationalist antics, and Coca Cola's Olympic commercials, with their stereotyped use of Chinese national symbols, arguably shifted meanings into new directions.

In a similar vein, participants at the Shanghai Expo were frequently able to stage their own interventions into the spectacle's discourses. The organisational decisions and implementations that led to this outcome were frequently messy, and they contained no small amount of ideological work that did not neatly align with a single, authoritative position designed by propaganda cadres at the central level. The architects of China's national pavilion mined the pre-modern past for allegories that would describe their design practices in terms of the official 'harmonious society' discourse, and in the process they developed a cosmopolitan narrative about diversity and pluralism that moved in intriguingly postmodern directions. In the officially commissioned theme pavilions, foreign

and Chinese collaborators came up with visions of the hypermodern present and the utopian future that departed noticeably from the kind of developmental paradigm that the central authorities seemed to prefer at the time. Simultaneously, the various foreign national pavilions entered the discussion of what China's place in the world might be, by picking up on popular Chinese discourses but infusing them with their own values, for instance promoting American liberalism or radical European enlightenment ideas through cleverly arranged exhibition designs.

That these activities took place in this fashion, within a media ecology that is carefully monitored and guided by the Chinese authorities, shows the degree to which the Hu-Wen administration's cultural governance approach 'leaned' into the ambiguities of networked discourses. Indeed, several of the more contentious exhibition organisers I spoke to were surprised that their intentional interventions into political discourses did not cause any backlash from the authorities. It is hard to say precisely why this was the case. It is possible that censors simply did not recognise the often subtle moments of critique; perhaps they were not worried about visitors being influenced by such messages. It is also plausible that the censors approved of what was on display, for instance as evidence that a confident China could stomach multiple ideological views during its prestigious spectacles. Whatever the rationale, the outcome was overall a pluralistic affair that inspired hope among many of the participants I spoke to that the discourses of 'harmony' might indeed become a justification for a generally more cosmopolitan approach to politics in China.

9.3 From Hu to Xi: the media management of a strongman?

After the close of the Hu-Wen era, this optimism among foreign observers seemed to have initially carried over into the first term of the new president and general secretary Xi Jinping. However, views of Chinese politics quickly regressed to the kind of China Threat perceptions that the previous administration had tried so hard to counter with its soft-power strategies. As Xi's administration tightened control over domestic discourses and rolled out a harsh anti-corruption campaign, foreign observers were quick to cast China's leader as a new Mao. In a Foreign Affairs article, Elizabeth Economy (2014) pointed out how 'Xi has moved quickly to amass political power and become, within the Chinese

leadership, not first among equals, but simply first'. Her description of how 'Xi has made a power grab – for himself, for the Communist Party, and for China' was accompanied by an image of a dragon that greedily smothers the whole world in its clutches. Popular news media reports were equally bleak. In an opinion-editorial in the *Financial Times*, Jamil Anderlini (2017) described domestic crackdowns under Xi's leadership and concluded that China now looked more like a dictatorship 'than at any time in several decades'. The *Guardian's* Tom Phillips (2018) provided a similar assessment: 'China's 64-year-old leader has waged war on dissenters, both inside and outside the Communist party, in a drive to establish total control, crushing civil society and jailing rivals to ensure his coronation as China's most powerful leader since Mao at last year's party congress'. When the PRC's National People's Congress extended the term of Xi Jinping's presidency in 2018, Pei Minxin contextualised the move by arguing that the PRC had never been 'your garden-variety dictatorship, but a successor to a totalitarian regime' and that it was today 'both far more ruthless and determined to protect its power than an average dictatorship' (quoted in Frum 2018).

I do not mean to dismiss concerns about the CCP's revitalised authoritarianism under Xi Jinping's leadership. Many of the repressive politics that have come out of this administration have been truly frightening, for instance the detention and 're-education' of Muslims in the western region of Xinjiang. It is understandable that such illiberal activities would prompt many observers to return to the vocabulary of totalitarian dictatorship, and yet there are a number of reasons why casting Xi as a dictator or comparing him to Mao Zedong is ultimately misleading. As Kerry Brown (2017) points out, rightly I believe, it is unhelpful to reduce the complex interactions that make up China's ruling party to a single cadre like Xi, even if that specific man is increasingly holding all the core positions of power in the country. Xi Jinping is also a product of the party and state system, and he was placed in a position of supreme visibility because China's leaders were deeply disconcerted by what they viewed as a crisis of legitimacy at the close of the Hu-Wen period. Brown writes (*ibid.*: 25):

Looking solely at Xi as a political figure, wondering at his power and its reach, means being seduced by the symptoms of a system, rather than truly understanding their underlying causes. Xi has only ever spoken in a context where he is within, working for, a party of

the Party, its servant if you like. And without an understanding of that institutional context, his powers make no sense.

Under Xi, the party has indeed rolled back many of the liberal policies of its predecessors. This is not to say, however, that they have abandoned the cultural governance approach I have described here. If anything, this approach has become more refined. As Pieke has aptly put it (2016: 33),

...the Communist Party does not govern. Instead, it leads, controls and inspires all institutions of government and governance. The Party's continued control over the people who lead and administer the institutions of governance continues to be the most vital feature of China's uniquely socialist mode of governance.

In network terms, the PRC's leaders have recentralised many of the country's increasingly distributed networks. While some sub-networks have taken on distinctly hierarchical shapes, for instance in the state-run media, where the Party has forcefully reestablished its ideological monopoly, in other cases such networks have continued to involve diverse actors and agendas, for instance when the leadership switches large corporate actors into its policy-making and implementation processes. Examples are recent state experiments with sophisticated digital monitoring and analytical tools, for which the authorities are recruiting companies like Alibaba and Baidu, and these actors in turn carry their commercial interest into the political interactions.

My colleague Rogier Creemers (2016) has called this a 'strategic nexus' between capitalist enterprises and ruling elites. I would even argue that the CCP has turned itself into a platform: a network that sits between disparate sectors of society and that connects these multi-sided segments through its switching activities (see Steinberg 2017 for a discussion of this platform idea). In that sense, the CCP continues its earlier attempts to create a 'consultative' version of its Leninist politics (Teets 2013), but without abandoning its ability to make use of the 'centralism' implied in Leninist 'democratic centralism' (see also Tsang 2009). As Brown (2017: 23-24) has noted, under Xi Jinping's rule the party is 'the network of networks', an 'epistemic community' that promises to tie together the disparate elements of a complex, hypermodern China.

9.4 Xi's networked spectacles and the future of CCP propaganda

When it comes to how the CCP has been managing China's network society, there have been far more continuities than ruptures with the immediate past. As Zhao Suisheng (2016) points out, 'Under Hu Jintao, the maintenance of political stability became the regime's top goal. Xi has only intensified this trend'. This logic applies not only to the organisational patterns I have discussed, but also to the political discourses that the leadership tries to mobilise for its cause. Specifically, the Xi administration has forcefully continued the Hu-Wen administration's attempts to put the CCP's appeal onto a broader footing by essentially aiming to transform the Party into a 'Volkspartei' that can legitimate itself to constituencies of diverse ideological persuasions, ranging from Maoism through Confucianism to neoliberalism.

The 'China Dream' campaign under Xi Jinping is an excellent example of this. In 2013, the administration published several series of propaganda posters and advertisements that promoted this China dream, and the discourses that these posters tapped into covered the full spectrum of available ideological traditions. Tropes from the Mao era were as much in evidence as semiotic components that harked back to the early modernist period of the 1920s and 1930s, but also to pre-modern ideas such as filial piety and other nominally Confucian virtues (see also my earlier discussion in Schneider 2013b). As Sun (2017) explains this juxtaposition of themes, 'the majority of the visual symbols used in the posters are transposed from the sign systems of Chinese traditional culture and the revolutionary discourse of the Communist Party of China', and with the proliferation of these various signs 'in public spaces, the visual propaganda of the Chinese Dream has turned it into a mundane movement of political culture', that is the banal background resources that I have discussed throughout this book.

Gow (2017) has similarly explored recent propaganda under Xi Jinping, focusing on the 'core socialist values' that the administration launched in 2012. These values have strongly informed the 'China Dream' discourse ever since. Gow describes how the proliferation of the core socialist values relies not just on the state, even though state institutions play an important role in disseminating these concepts. The twelve values are an invitation to civil society actors to join the meaning-making efforts in contemporary China. As Gow writes (2017: 111), 'the strategic

intertwining of Confucian values with those proscribed in the Chinese Dream discourse increases significantly the likelihood that CCP values will find traction with Chinese people and, over time, become constitutive of common sense in contemporary China’.

Indeed, as propaganda efforts continue under Xi, diverse actors are again joining the networks that make ‘common sense’ of these concepts. These efforts are often aspirational, framing what the core values of Chinese society *should* mean, rather than what Chinese society is *actually* like, but as such they have the potential to provide utopian outlets for the imagination, and possibly for future politics. Take the cases that I have represented in Figure 9.2. It shows an official propaganda poster in Beijing (top), which lists all twelve of the core socialist values, and two paintings near a junior high-school in Shanghai (bottom), which interpret these values in their own way. The paintings take their cue from the watch words of Xi-era discourse, but they creatively come up with their own versions of what those concepts might mean. On the bottom left, the artist or artists decided to interpret the term ‘equality’ in terms of gender equality, placing a spunky female character in celebratory pose as her side of a scale evens out with her male counterpart. On the bottom right, the painting contextualises the concept of ‘liberty’ by showing a woman who apparently went shopping during a sale. While arguably an accurate portrayal of what ‘liberty’ signifies for many in today’s China, this neoliberal consumerist interpretation does not sit comfortably with the idea of ‘socialist’ values.

9.5 Conclusion

China’s networked spectacles, during the Hu-Wen administration as much as during the current Xi administration, are far more than mere propaganda statements by a state that has arguably perfected its mass-communication strategy. They are occasions for diverse political and commercial actors to engage in networked politics, legitimate themselves and their agendas, and ultimately recalibrate the very meaning of modernity at the start of the 21st century. As I have argued above, studying these processes in the Chinese context is not just about China. It is also about politics in societies dominated by often transnational capitalist media ecologies. The PRC strategy for how to utilise the networks that constitute these ecologies is one solution to a wider challenge: how to



Figure 9.2: Making Sense of China's Core Socialist Values. Image © Schneider 2018.

govern vast, complex, technologically advanced societies. There are other solutions, each coming up against different problems and constraints. Personally, I remain sceptical whether it is fruitful to recalibrate complex social and communication networks into centralised, hierarchical forms, effectively building them round updated versions of established institutions like nation-states and corporate conglomerates. Be that as it may, if we hope to improve the way human societies work today, we need to explore how different solutions play out, what their potentials are, and where their limits lie.

One important lesson that China's networked spectacles can then teach us is that mass-mediated discourses are never dictated by any individual actor, regardless of how powerfully they are represented in a network of interactions. Discourses still need to be interpreted and reused by audiences. In modern China as much as elsewhere, audiences are active, well-informed, transnationally connected, and in the possession of advanced communication technologies. For some social groups, national symbols may develop a life of their own. Chauvinistic

online discussions or aggressive torch relay demonstrations show that there is no guarantee that citizens will internalise the intended official meanings of the harmonious Chinese nation. While China's networked spectacles during the Hu-Wen era can be understood as an attempt by the Chinese authorities to pragmatically reinvent the Chinese nation as modern, cultured, harmonious, and international, the continuing use of nationalism as a framework of meaning nevertheless remains outside anyone's control. As various actors rework that framework through their own chains of interactions, it ultimately creates a brand that is unmanageable.

Identity formation is a complex process that I shall not discuss in detail here. What is important is that identities are not based on one social role, or one set of values. Individuals draw from a broad range of cultural artefacts to make sense of who they are and how the world around them functions. As media analyst Henry Jenkins has argued, this process is highly creative and remains beyond the control of any social or political institution (2006: 39): individuals venture out into the fields of symbols that the cultural industries have tilled, but they then use the fruits that have grown there as they see fit; audiences are not mere consumers but much more 'poachers' of meanings. Jenkins shows how this process works within American fan culture, and his descriptions of fan reactions to the perceived abuse of 'their' symbols exhibits many parallels to the reaction of, for instance, Chinese nationalists when the symbols of their nation are not deployed in ways of which they approve (ibid.: 55):

The ideology of fandom involves both a commitment to some degree of conformity to the original ... materials, as well as a perceived right to evaluate the legitimacy of any use of those materials, either by textual producers or by textual consumers.

The Chinese authorities have established their own grammar of modernity as a central frame for understanding China, pointing out to the citizenry that national symbols like the flag, the national anthem, the various national monuments, or the patriotic vocabulary of the state media are central to the nation's cultural and historical 'essence'. In doing so, China's leaders have managed to create a common language that all citizens can share to make sense of the world, but at the same time they have set in motion a process of individual identity formation that in the final instance escapes the control of the governing agents. Even

when the frame of reference is set, the actual users of national symbols communicate with each other and with non-state agents, reprogramming political discourses in the process. After this process has started, any perceived misuse of the framework of symbols, whether by foreign or domestic actors, becomes an attack on the individual's identity and elicits the kinds of strong emotional responses and political (re)actions that we witness from interconnected publics today. Indeed, the Xi era is no different from the preceding Hu-Wen period in this regard, as it is indeed no different from complex discursive activities elsewhere in the world. As Foucault (1978/1990: 101) has put it:

... discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.

My analysis of China's networked spectacles suggests that the discourses that emerged from these events were indeed as 'fragmented' and 'fragile' as Foucault suggested, and that this was the outcome of complicated interactions between a multitude of actors with often diverging interests. As the Xi administration continues many of the cultural governance practices that its predecessor established in China at the beginning of the 21st century, it will remain confronted with the hindrances and stumbling-blocks that ritual interactions perpetually produce, creating spaces for creative meaning-making despite any attempts to control discursive activities through strongman politics.

