Regimes of Resonance: Cosmos, Empire, and Changing Technologies of CCP Rule

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Abstract
This analysis aims to place certain key elements of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule observed under Xi Jinping today into longer and fuller historical perspective. It highlights trademark CCP practices of ordering space, marking time, potent political messaging, and vigorous propaganda diffusion as these have evolved over many years up to the present, reconsidering these in light of early Chinese cosmological thought and later symbolic practices of empire.

Keywords
spatiotemporal order, legitimacy, cosmology, empire, ritual, sympathetic resonance, positive energy, communications technologies, Chinese Communist Party propaganda

Political actors and analysts around the world have been taken aback by what is widely perceived as a suddenly more autocratic (even imperial) style of rule in China since the ascendancy of Xi Jinping. Domestically, Xi has insisted, unequivocally, that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) be in firm “command” over all aspects of life. Abroad, touting his signature conception of the “China Dream,” Xi has even gone so far as to elicit an oddly nostalgic-yet-triumphant ethos of a historically resplendent China 中华...

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that, after long and miserable travail, is now at last on the verge of recapturing its lost civilizational grandeur and its imagined standing in the world: as a sophisticated, admired, and benevolent empire. Xi’s appropriation of this particular aesthetic of rule—wrapping himself and his party in a cloak of quite such imperious pretension—has been quickly and handily done, over just this last decade. Yet almost all along were there not copious signs in CCP thought and practice that something like this could be coming?

Approaching the Question

Some political analysts approach the systems they study as, primarily, organizational/institutional assemblages, fascinatingly animated by the contending agendas of political interest groupings and networks. For these scholars, the Xi Jinping regime ticks all the boxes of modern authoritarianism and autocracy, and the main practical question at issue is just how resilient (or not) Xi’s autocratic power assemblage may ultimately prove to be (e.g., Fewsmith and Nathan, 2019). Other analysts prefer to approach the systems they study as largely discursive constructs, animated most prominently by political beliefs and ideational assemblages. For these scholars, the Xi Jinping regime qualifies as a fine example of modern “ideological governance,” and the main questions at issue are how and why ideology—a form of statecraft—happens to evolve in precisely the ways it does (Cheek, 2021; Mayer, 2018). As students of Chinese politics have been schooled to understand since Franz Schurmann (1966) first contributed his seminal Ideology and Organization in Communist China, “ideology” and “organization” are each indisputably indispensable components of how, and how well, the CCP system functions.

This article, however, will look primarily at another essential component of contemporary political systems, their performance and legitimation: the symbolic, ritual, and aesthetic components of governing, which also count for much in the lived experiences, perceptions, and memories of those being governed. The particular sets of symbolic resources deployed, especially, in those political forms that were newly invented in the twentieth century—fascism and communism—have drawn much fruitful scholarly attention in the past (Lane, 1981; Arvidsson and Blomqvist, 1987; Zamponi, 1997; Schmid, 2005). And more recently, in what has become known over the past decade and a half as the “aesthetic turn” in studies of politics and international relations, many fresh insights, approaches, and debates about the power of political aesthetics have been opening up (Bleiker, 2001, 2017; Rancière, 2010; Benney, 2020).
The aim of this analysis therefore is to place selected symbolic, ritual, and aesthetic elements of CCP rule observable under Xi today into longer and fuller historical perspective. It turns a spotlight on sedulous party practices of ordering space, of marking time, and of potent political messaging and propaganda diffusion. It calls attention first to recurrent CCP exercises of boundary making over territorial/geographic spaces, as well as human/social spaces. It looks, secondly, at party rituals of marking the passage of time, and at projects of synchronizing and pacing the times of both public/ceremonial and mundane/personal life. A third strand of the discussion traces the party’s almost unceasingly strenuous efforts to radiate its own energy, its positive spirit, outward—via incessant rounds of intense “propaganda and thought work”—in order to cause that spirit of the party to penetrate into and resonate over all times, places, and social spaces within the orbit of its rule.

The goals of the narrative ahead are as follows. First, to recall the wide range and determined persistence of party-state projects of ordering and reordering, time keeping, time telling, and energetic propaganda messaging, from its very early revolutionary days through to today. Second, to consider the impacts of advances over time in the communications technologies employed in pursuit of this repertoire of governing practices. And finally, to relate these distinctive party techniques of mass management, political messaging, and legitimation to the conspicuously empire-like constellation of rulership styles and logics which has now crystallized so emphatically under Xi Jinping.

Some of the inspirations for CCP projects of spatiotemporal ordering, and for the imperative that it continually radiate a sensation of its own vital energy throughout the land, will be traced back here to origins in early Chinese ontological and social thought and practices (symbolic and material) of expressing and projecting authority and legitimacy, as these evolved over centuries of imperial rule. Readers should be forewarned that in some sections to come, which refer to early Chinese concepts of cosmic “resonance” or “harmony” and relate these to latter-day CCP practices of rule, an analogy is made between the amplifying and enlarging “sympathetic resonance” we sometimes come across in the performance of music and (the assuredly far more tedious) echoing of mantras we just can’t escape in the performance of party “propaganda education.” Musical resonance has been selected here to help explicate this technique of governance only because it is the kind of resonance phenomenon that most of us are most likely to have encountered directly, and appreciated; and because acoustic resonance is the kind of resonance most familiar to this author.¹ For some readers, especially those with greater knowledge of science, technology, and engineering, let it be noted that other forms of resonance occurring in the physical world could be borrowed equally well for comparison. Electromagnetic resonance, molecular
resonance, even the optical resonance that goes into laser lighting—all these might make equally decent analogies for the ostensibly magical, animating, and reverberating effect that “universal resonance” was believed, by early Chinese thinkers, to possess.

It is important to be clear from the start, however, that the implication meant to be drawn from this tracing to ancient origins is emphatically not that an imagined Chinese cultural/philosophical continuity has somehow counted for more than change; far less that nothing important about the arts of governance in China has been seriously altered since the Han dynasty! On the contrary, over now a century of CCP history, everything in China—political ideas, exigencies, opportunities, technologies—has been morphing more or less continually. The working assumption informing this analysis is, instead, that precisely in response to all the flux and flow perpetually encountered in the larger field of (global and domestic) forces, party leaders have deemed themselves required to be prepared, continually, to rethink their own earlier imagined strategies, patterns, and designs; recalibrate those tools of space/time ordering they held in hand; and revise their political-legitimation messaging if they are to steady the shifting balance of social energies, and so, persist in power. But, to prepare the ground for this reflection on party strategies for projecting authority, power, and legitimacy over the length and breadth of an ever-changing twentieth-to-twenty-first-century China we must first take a long look back, to some very early “beginnings.”

The Cosmic Frame: Co-relativity, Ritual, Resonance

Scholars of early Chinese cosmological thought, in scrutinizing a steadily mounting body of discovered texts and artefacts dating from the Bronze Age through the Iron Age, have taught us that the conceptual and discursive frameworks in which the nature of the universe (and the place of humanity within it) were imagined and debated in those early times amounted to an elaborate form of “immanentism,” which, as Alan Strathern has quipped, can be considered “the default mode of human religiosity” (Strathern, 2019: 5). Immanentist religions are prone to conjuring up a rather crowded sort of universe—an interpenetrated sphere of action and cross-action encompassing the natural world and a supernatural one; the latter potentially (hence, “immanently”) including a multitude of gods, ancestors, spirits, demons, ghosts, and other forces, any or all of which could be capable of influencing, for better or worse, the lives of individual men and women, entire families or clans, and even the course of events for whole human societies and polities. Early
Chinese cosmological theory, they tell us further, was especially deeply imprinted with patterns of analogical or “correlative” thinking (Schwartz, 1985; Hall and Ames, 1995: 119–41). Correlative cosmologies comprehend the universe as an all-encompassing ordered system, within which there are discoverable “correspondences among various domains of reality” to be found. Discerning those correspondences, in turn, allows for the systematic correlation of “categories of the human world, such as the human body, behavior, morality, the socio-political order, and historical changes, with categories of the cosmos, including time, space, the heavenly bodies, seasonal movement, and natural phenomena.”

Successive projects of probing, refining, and perfecting these intricate systems of correlation, over the centuries, were not a matter of interest only to astrologers, soothsayers, and philosophers; these projects were also political. Precisely because early Chinese correlative schemes claimed to connect the infinite power of Heaven, Nature, and the spirits with the power to influence human affairs on Earth (and with those exceptional persons who were to be entrusted with wielding that power), choosing one way of mapping the cosmos over another, then matching up a host of correlated categories within such a map, could have everything to do with sorting and selecting among the active contenders for authority in human society at any given moment.3

Practices of compound correlation building, as instruments for detecting and interpreting the movements of the cosmos (so as to decide how to act wisely within the realm of human affairs), were deeply ingrained in even the earliest Chinese texts; most puzzlingly to the modern mind, perhaps, in the *Yi Jing* 易经, or *Book of Changes*. Synthesized out of *yet more* ancient manuals for divination (Pankenier, 1995, 2013), by the time it was compiled and annotated as the *Zhouyi* 周易 in the early twelfth century BCE, this classic, with its sixty-four hexagrams, already melded together several key philosophical assumptions in Chinese cosmology about the primal creative energy of yin-yang forces in the universe, about the passages of energy in *qi* 气 (cosmic breath), and about “reality” as embedded in processes of “inexhaustible origination” (Cheng, 2009: 90).

In her study of the transition from the *sifang* 四方 (“four quarters”) cosmology of the Bronze Age to the *wuxing* 五行 (“five phases”) cosmology of the early empire, Aihe Wang demonstrates how debates over the crafting of correlative cosmology itself became a “discourse for political argument and power struggle” as well as an “art of action in a world of conflict and change” (Wang, 2000: 3). During the Warring States period (ca. 500–221 BCE), she explains, rising social groups (including religious specialists, military professionals, scholars, and bureaucrats) worked to dismantle the *sifang* cosmological model which had sustained the centrality, for religious purposes, of the
royal ancestors of the ruling clan, replacing it with the more dynamically conceptualized cosmology of the five phases, which established multiple direct connections between the human world at large and the cosmos. This shift in the modelling of cosmic correlations created new sources discoverable on Earth for divine authority, introducing new concepts of sovereignty that resided within the human sphere itself (Wang, 2000: chaps. 2–3). The result, through continued debate over time, was to supersede a concept of political sovereignty that had inhered almost exclusively in ancestors, bloodlines, and lineal descent, with one expressed instead in terms of cosmic cycles of conquest on the one hand and generation on the other. This altered framework made space for legitimate authority grounded both in force (and punishment) as well as in codes of ethics, hierarchy, and ritual, thus setting out the basic parameters within which the qualities of an emperor, of imperial statecraft, and of proper political authority itself would be measured, constructed, disputed, and rearticulated for centuries.

Historians today regularly describe the emperor as the symbolically constructed “axis” or “pivot” of the cosmos, just as the celestial pole (associated with the Supreme One 太一) was understood to be the “pivot” of the universe—a position in cosmic space/time akin to the “emptiness” at the point where the spokes of a wheel join (Pankenier, 2013: chap. 3; Raphael, 2016: 195). China’s emperors, that is, personified the one space/time locus—or hinge—at which all the “infinite oppositions” inherent in the cosmos “came into proximity and dynamically interacted with one another” (Wang, 2000: 208). The emperor—the single socket, as it were, for sublime connectivity (in a universe otherwise conceived as intensely charged with contradictions)—thus played the role of open portal, of “sacred void” or hollow conduit through which the will of Heaven might enter, reverberate on through, and resonate with Earth/Nature, and humanity. By extension into the realm of more purely mundane and political matters, the emperor was similarly conceived as the “pivot of the empire,” the one point at which “diverse compositions of power contested and constrained one another” yet could be united within “a complex hierarchy and dynamic process of interaction” (Wang, 2000: 215).

China’s emperors were most definitely expected to govern, of course. But prior even to the work of governing, and far more indispensable, was an emperor’s faithful and flawless performance of ritual. Nor did imperial ritual performance amount only to light work, mere humdrum routine. Perpetually impelled by correlations of astrological and calendrical time with formalized sacred/spatial positions, tempered always by watchfulness for signs auspicious or inauspicious, emperors spent a good part of most of their days and nights performing their alignment with heavenly mandates and rhythms, in the “triangular relationship between time, space, and political authority.”
Each month [the emperor] would dwell in the proper room, dress in the proper colour, eat the proper food, listen to the proper music, sacrifice to the proper deities, and attend to the proper affairs of state. It was understood that his synchronous movement with heaven and earth would secure harmony between his rule and the universe. (Wu, 2003: 109–10)

By “keeping time,” synchronizing his own (and his courtiers’) actions in space and time in this way, “the emperor could internalize the intrinsic movement of the universe . . . [and] rule the world without using force” (Wu, 2003: 113). From as early as the third century CE, emperors were using drum towers and bell towers to “tell time,” too; and to relay official/imperial time to the people, at least to those inhabiting more thickly settled areas. By the Tang era, when it was decided to rebuild and greatly expand the earliest of China’s imperial capital cities, Chang’an, the new plans created a massive urban grid-work of concentric, walled squares. And over the newly built city, enclosed at its outer limits by high, thick, pounded-earth walls, imperial time was relayed out each evening, from a drum tower (adjacent to the imperial compound, at the epicenter of the city). The sound of the drums was then amplified, by order of Emperor Taizong, with beating drums stationed on every street, so as to be audible over the whole of the great town. The rhythmic resonance of the drums announced the nightly curfew, the closing of the city’s four main gates at dusk, and then the closing of the gate that sealed off each city ward from the others. Drums resounded once again at the gates’ reopening, at dawn. It was via the \textit{ritual} and the \textit{resonance} of the drums, then, that “the government’s supervision of public time telling in a Chinese city” was “fully realized” (Wu, 2003: 116–17).

Imperial ambitions to order space and govern time became only more intense under later emperors, and particularly during the Song, which was nothing if not “a mapping regime” (Mostern, 2011: 99). The “density of state presence” was greatly enhanced then through administrative place making, as the restructuring of territorial jurisdictions became “a tool of statecraft used for calibrating the balance of power between court and region, and between the state and its subjects” (Mostern, 2011: 20). Such periods of “administrative activism” (and there would be more after the Song) were enabled in part by expanded literacy and learning, by development of the empire-wide civil service examination system, and by staffing a professional bureaucracy to serve the throne. Later emperors would have much finer, more far-reaching tools than drums at their disposal to make their edicts real and resonant across the land. Still, even on into early modern times, neither the general obsession with geographic mapping, place making, and the compilation of local gazetteers, nor the elaboration of more and
more efficient techniques of civil and military administration were ever to
displace the significance of ritual, spectacle, and sympathetic resonance,
either in the actual work of governing or in the outward display of imperial
good governance.8

For example, Angela Zito’s vivid decoding of the Qing dynasty’s rituals
of Grand Sacrifice—which all Qing emperors were obliged to carry out,
several times each year, in elaborately orchestrated processions to Beijing’s
axially positioned temples (of Heaven, Earth, Ancestors, Land and Grain,
the Moon, and the Sun)—makes apparent how absorbing and demanding
the many intersecting disciplines of body and mind required of emperors,
and the relevant members of their courts, must have been. To prepare them-
selves, through these ritual disciplines, to receive and embrace the will of
Heaven, bodies and minds alike had first to be cleansed (in fasting) and
polished (in contemplative practice) like the jade and other ritual vessels
themselves that would be placed ceremonially, in specified orders and for-
mations, on the altars. Music, prayer reading, sacrificial offerings, subtle
choreographies of gestures, gazes, prostrations, bows, and oblations—all
these and other precisely scripted acts of “centering,” as Zito stresses, had
to be executed with precision in order symbolically to transform the
emperor and the many others in his colorfully robed entourage into the
embodied “sites for the emergence of ordered pattern from chaos” (Zito,
1997: 37, chaps. 5–6)

In her account of why the emperor, once returned to his palace, rested on
a throne facing south (the cardinal direction associated with Heaven), Zito
explains how, seated that way the imperial person himself “acted as a concen-
trator” of the sun’s positive “yang” energy that, in turn, radiated upon his king-
dom” (Zito, 1997: 142). The ultimate purpose of the ritual performance—with
all its gathering in and centering of the will of Heaven within the imperial
court and the emperor’s own person—was achieved, then, in the throne room.
As the emperor carried out the day-to-day work of governing, facing south,
the energy of the cosmos continued resonating right on through him, to be
radiated out over “all under Heaven.”

To sum up the discussion so far, over China’s long history of imperial
rule, a distinctive aesthetic for legitimating and projecting political power
and authority over the realm was assembled. This aesthetic put much
emphasis on ritual; on schematics of hierarchy, encompassing, and center-
ing via systems of spatial ordering; on attentiveness to time keeping, time
telling, pace and synchronicity; and on ideas about radiance and the genera-
tion of sympathetic resonance over the realm, both as a means and a marker
of right rule.
Farewell to Empire?

As the efficacy of empire decayed over the course of the nineteenth century, and finally crumbled at the beginning of the twentieth, just about all of the (mystical, moral, and mimetic) principles of ordering associated with it would be widely mocked and derided. After empire, nonetheless, those who would build a new China dwelt daily, for decades, amid the signifying rubble of that old order. Throughout the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s, denizens of China’s cities, whether rickshaw pullers, shopkeepers, entertainers, or bankers, plied their trades over streets and alleyways surrounded by moldering urban monumentalities—walls and garrisons, drum towers, commemorative arches, and gated compounds. Rural villagers, itinerant traders, and fisherfolk, too, eked out a household’s subsistence laboring under sun, moon, and stars while ranging over landscapes strewn with sacred mountains, shrines, temples, and carved stone stele, or gliding over waterscapes still crosscut by imposing canals, bridges, and other remnants of imperial hydraulics projects. For almost all who might boast they were there to see the “fall of empire” in China, the remainder of their days nonetheless would be lived out in spaces and at paces still heavily imprinted by those older aesthetics of immanent energies, space/time ordering, and celestial authority.

Even so, the “imperial aesthetic” of authority and legitimacy, attached as it was to notions of empire (and emperorship personified), was not, by any means, the only one the CCP might have selected from all the historical options available to it for reprise and repurposing. The richness of Chinese civilization had always kept several different morally and heroically grounded archetypes for claiming legitimate authority at play within it; some of them running counter to the imperial aesthetic, others intersecting more tangentially with it. To name a few: the honorable “outlaw/rebel” (always true to his word); the righteous prefect/judge (steadfast in pursuit of justice and fairness for common people and communities); the preternaturally or magically inspired prophet/“seer” (summoned by assorted leaders of millennial peasant uprisings over the centuries); the eremitic “superior-minded yet undervalued scholar/bureaucrat-turned-poet”; and the “upright serving official boldly speaking truth to wayward power.” Elements of some of these alternative styles for claiming uprightness and performing authority would also, from time to time, reappear in later CCP practice (especially during some of the more challenging periods of Mao Zedong’s long tenure as party chairman). Yet the curiously ironic fact, as underscored in the remainder of this discussion, is that in its public rituals, its propaganda, and other signature elements of its political legitimation work, the CCP—with the exception only of the period when Deng Xiaoping was at the helm—would most reliably opt to
redeploy tools plainly adapted from that much older, cosmically conceptualized imperial toolkit.

**CCP Governance: Wartime**

Only a dozen years separated the Treaty of Versailles from Japan’s invasion of Manchuria. In the chronic brutality and disorder of China’s warlord era, only two modern-nationalist political parties were fully fashioned. Failing to form an enduring alliance, they fell instead to competing cruelly for territories, troops, and strategic advantage. Both parties acquired a degree of experience governing over different segments of the country, even as each continued sifting and choosing the signifying elements essential if it were to reassemble a popularly credible, “new” (i.e., disenchanted, modern/rational), yet unambiguously still “Chinese” style of rule. Unsurprisingly, those freshly minted patterns of power and command to emerge from both parties would be plainly inscribed with the spirit of battle-toughened military pace and discipline (van de Ven, 2000; Shambaugh, 1997: 125–26). Yet there would be other, interestingly divergent, experiments in the two parties’ respective quests for more fittingly secular forms of political ritual and more penetrating administrative systems of spatiotemporal ordering and public management.

Guomindang (Nationalist Party) governance was characterized then by its optimistic, progressive-modernizing ethos of planning and engineering. With its superior command over China’s urban centers, fiscal resources, and state bureaucratic apparatus, Guomindang ambitions were expressed best perhaps—at those times and in those spaces they held power—in urban planning and centralized projects of administrative redesign (Tsin, 2000; Lu, 1999; Dong, 2003; Musgrove, 2000). Noting China’s “long history . . . of planning capital cities and their official edifices,” Kirby observes that “what distinguished the Nationalist regime was its confidence in its ability to plan, first for the capital and then for the entire country, on an international technological standard” (Kirby, 2000: 141). Ruling in the manner of a “proto-developmental state,” the Guomindang of the Nanjing decade strove to lead China beyond superstition and backwardness by means largely secular-cosmopolitan, reformist, technical, and logistical (Nedostup, 2009).

The communists, on the other hand, forced to seek refuge in remote mountainous and rural territories—which were neither prosperous nor well-supplied with taxable commercial enterprises or trained technicians of any sort—would draw liberally instead on more popular knowledges and indigenous cultural resources in fashioning their new political aesthetic. The CCP’s performance of legitimate rule would come to feature a humbler ethic of
parity and plain living; a fiery readiness to endure sacrifice for the common cause; a grounded political-administrative ethos marked by empirical investigation, trial and error, tightly centralized decision making, penetrating local organizing, and activist-led campaigns of mass mobilization. At first only experimental, such practices would evolve into the CCP’s signature “mass line style” of good governance, given its canonical articulation in Mao Zedong’s 1943 essay on “methods of leadership.”

In all the practical work of our Party, all correct leadership is necessarily “from the masses, to the masses.” This means: take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action, and test the correctness of these ideas in such action. Then once again concentrate ideas from the masses and once again go to the masses so that the ideas are persevered in and carried through. And so on, over and over again, in an endless spiral, with the ideas becoming more correct, more vital and richer each time. Such is the Marxist theory of knowledge. (Mao, 1965: 3.119)

The precise rituals and routines essential to the performance of “correct” leadership, as Mao outlined them, are worth careful inspection. For, in essence, they amount to nothing less than a modern reworking of those ancien régime rites of ordering, centering, radiating, and resonating outlined above. In Mao’s reformulation (as republicanism demands), a ruler’s inspiration is no longer caught on the winds of a divine cosmos, but found immanent, instead, in the ideas of the masses. It is not the emperor and his court anymore, but the party which assumes the pivotal position around which all else revolves, becoming the “sacred void” within which the “will” can be condensed, reflected, and caused to resonate across the realm. Not the “will of Heaven” any longer, but the “will of the people,” and not in accord with “celestial time,” but in “historical-material time;” yet still imagined by Mao (as time was also imagined in the Book of Changes) to unfold in the form of “an endless spiral” (Chang, 2009: 227).

In its early soviets and liberated base areas, the CCP governed day-to-day, simultaneously waging revolution, recruiting soldiers to fight, and actively “mobilizing the masses” to support them. These revolutionary base areas were remote places—rural, rugged mountain regions—where most of the population lived by arduous labor on the land, never learning to read or calculate sums on an abacus. The CCP set up the rudimentary scaffolding for governmental administration over these regions, deputizing work teams to investigate conditions area by area and report back. After deliberation, party
leaders settled on a course of action, then sent out teams again to inform activists and villagers of new present dangers (or targets), requirements, policies, and regulations. To get the larger message of revolutionary struggle out, and make that message resonate positively in day-to-day life, CCP and Red Army activists had little choice but to rely primarily on word-of-mouth. They set up literacy classes and political study groups when the conditions of war allowed, but worked hard too at adapting already-familiar local popular cultural forms to their purpose. They composed wartime lyrics for popular “hill tunes” and favorite love songs, to carry news from the front and encourage solidarity with the party, its army, and the revolution. These songs were taught and popularized in live performances, operas, and other amateur outdoor theatricals. To keep spirits high the Red Army, famously, “sang” when it marched. 9

CCP leaders had little capacity to undertake major projects of spatial reordering, construction, or engineering during those years of stringent struggle. Such projects became feasible only after national reunification in 1949. The evidence from the revolutionary years is, however, that the party was already accustomed to working diligently to alter people’s experiences of time. The aim appeared to be one of filling up and saturating “public time,” the free time of soldiers, villagers, and townspeople: bringing them together in new groups and in busily creative activities; while bringing them also to perform, as actors and as audiences, their sympathetic resonance with the party’s agenda for revolution.

**Times and Spaces of the PRC**

In October 1949, when Mao Zedong ascended the Gate of Heavenly Peace to proclaim the founding of the People’s Republic, the weather-beaten grandeur of the imperial backdrop for the ceremony must have encouraged the public realization that almost all the territories once governed by the Qing had, at long last, been reunited under a single, pivotal authority. Accentuating the imperial-spatial reunion, time keeping too was reunified. China’s five different time zones were collapsed into one at this juncture, officially putting all the former territories of empire back again on “Beijing time” (Dutton, 2008: 15–16).10

Mao faced south on that great day, as had the enthroned emperor, though with his attentive gaze now fixed symbolically not toward the Temple of Heaven, but on the cheering crowd below. In the poster-portrait iconography of Mao over the years to come, however, the chairman would frequently be featured silhouetted against glowing (yang) rays of sunlight; and during the Cultural Revolution years, when he often presided over mass rallies of
enthralled young Red Guards at Tiananmen, poster after poster pictured him as virtually one with the sun itself.\footnote{11}

Projects of spatial reordering in the capital city were begun without delay after 1949. The “people’s square” at Tiananmen was immensely enlarged and flanked with fresh monuments and national museums judged more fitting to a modern people’s republic. In the grand redesign of this sacred/national space at the center of Beijing, Chang’an Jie (the Avenue of Eternal Peace), running east and west just to the north of Tiananmen Square, was doubled in breadth, to serve, later, like Moscow’s Red Square, as the site for many elaborately choreographed and meticulously synchronized National Day parades and other state spectacles (Hung, 2007).\footnote{12} Thus a newly-fashioned aesthetic of power and legitimacy for the CCP borrowed its motifs liberally from older Chinese (celestial-imperial and folk-rustic), as well as more modern (Leninist/Stalinist), sensibilities. Big parades and public monuments in Beijing, however, were just the beginning.

Matrices of the Mao Era

With the tools finally in hand for governing on the grandest scale, the new party-state was poised to enforce a series of social re-engineering projects that radically reconfigured the spaces, and reset the times, of people’s daily lives. First, the abstract “content” of the Chinese social space itself (formerly constructed in reference to concepts of gender, family, lineage, work/occupation, and locality), was re-demarcated in terms of class (and class struggle). Within a very few years, every Chinese individual was categorized as belonging (for life) to a specific, inheritable class position. And over the three decades to follow, national time would be lived, recorded, and officially recounted as an epic of successive party-led “mass campaigns” of class struggle.

As for territorial spaces, the homes, lands, and labor sites of “agrarian” China were first de-concentrated, as the assets of “landlord” and “rich peasant” classes were expropriated and redistributed to poorer peasant households. All these assets were almost immediately re-concentrated, however, into agricultural cooperatives, collective farms, and much larger “people’s communes” 人民公社, where farmers and other laborers (now sharing livestock, tools, forests, orchards, and harvests) were grouped together into teams and brigades, and compensated in “work points” that accounted individually for the precise times/spaces that each member had worked. With collectivization, rural schools, health stations, canteens, and other public services were all provided in common. In slower seasons, commune members were also mobilized into construction teams tasked with building basic infrastructure
projects such as roads, bridges, terraced fields, and dams. Familial times and spaces were reformatted in even more intimate ways, as compulsory schooling for children—boys and girls—was introduced; minimum marriage ages (23 for women, 25 for men) were mandated; and young couples were sternly advised to space pregnancies at least three to four years apart. Like the Nationalists before them, the CCP under Mao worked hard to “eliminate superstition” and erase from rural landscapes all remaining relics and reminders of competing cosmologies of power.

As for “urban” China, assets and labor spaces there were reorganized into cooperative and collective danwei 单位, staffed by state-assigned workers and managers paid on standardized wage scales, producing goods to meet targets in state plans, and dwelling within walled compounds with their families, where they were eligible for (and also dependent upon) collective social services and a share in state-rationed commodities. With the introduction of the hukou 户口 (household registration) system after 1958, every Chinese household and each individual was attached to a specific rural or urban place to live and work. Travel beyond one’s assigned area, whether on public business or private, generally required an official pass and letter of introduction to police and other relevant authorities at the travel destination. Except for participation in military service, it soon became rare for people to stay for long away from their place of household registration.

Public mores were quickly tightened under Mao. Wandering or “placeless” people, beggars, drug addicts, petty thieves, and prostitutes were rounded up and sent off for job training and work placement; acceptable dress codes became utilitarian and uniform; hairstyles, austere; jewelry and cosmetics, shunned. In schools and urban danwei the day often dawned with group calisthenics performed in time to marches broadcast over loudspeakers and ended with the playing of the national anthem before lights-out. Heroic feats of rate-busting model workers were heavily popularized. Speediness, punctuality, and quick-time disciplines were heralded as modern ways that served the revolution. By the late 1950s domestic production of timepieces of all kinds was already rising rapidly, and wristwatches (along with bicycles and sewing machines) were promoted as “must have” consumer items for urban dwellers (Gerth, 2020).

Party propaganda workers strove to saturate communes, urban work units, and schools with enthusiastic messages promoting diligent labor and study. Yet communication technologies remained primitive. A standard system of simplified Chinese characters was introduced, and, as popular literacy advanced, bulletin boards proliferated, political slogans were painted everywhere, and colorful calendars and posters were distributed for decoration and inspiration; much public information was still communicated only verbally.
however, in small group study meetings, and over wired broadcasting systems (Whyte, 1974; Shue, 1980). Standard Mandarin Chinese was promoted in schools, although local dialects continued to be used in regional broadcasts. Mobile propaganda/entertainment teams screened films outdoors in towns and villages. And some rural people had access to a radio. But correct “class consciousness,” joined to the ideological and artistic purism that came with the Cultural Revolution years, ultimately left little spontaneity in party-state propaganda messaging, and only a tiny repertoire of songs and dances were deemed “revolutionary enough” to be performed.

Under Mao the CCP adapted, for its own purposes, several features of the former imperial aesthetic of power: ordering space, marking time, ritually encompassing, centering, radiating, and resonating. Until, in 1977, the sacred site of Tiananmen was yet again to be appropriated, as Mao’s remains were put on public display in a mausoleum erected at the very center of the square—a memorial hall built to a design that Rudolf Wagner has characterized as an “orgy of centrality.” But whereas Qing emperors, in re-enacting ritual after ritual in the temples of Beijing, had imagined themselves radiating a splendidly transcendent, stabilizing, and harmonizing authority across a realm of astonishingly different cultures and peoples, inhabiting different place/times, all under Heaven, the party under Mao had instead sought quite literally and materially to standardize the time, space, and culture of the nation.

From the outside, Mao-era space-times did indeed project an appearance of standardization, even regimentation. Yet from the inside, so often, they were experienced as sites of contrived social strain and bitter struggles for domination. So, from that solemn day when his embalmed corpse was lodged in its crystal sarcophagus at the very center of the center of his wished-for realm of relentless revolution, people and party alike entered upon two and a half dangerously disjointed decades. Over the coming quarter century, nearly all those spatiotemporal certainties the Mao era had set in place would be disassembled.

**Deng’s Daring Departure: Sprawled Spaces and Ragtimes of Reform**

In 1978, with Deng Xiaoping at the helm, the party-state began phasing out its bedrock sociopolitical ordering scheme—the system of class labels. The following year, it began phasing in a radical new “one-child” policy. Seemingly incongruous decisions—the first ostensibly easing one crucial instrument of party social control, the second harshly intensifying another, already-intrusive, population-control regime—these two departures actually
offered important clues to what would be driving state priorities for the future. Beijing’s new power holders, eyes trained on the soaring successes of their East Asian neighbors, clearly apprehended the heavy costs of their Cultural Revolution decade. China had been outclassed—economically, technically, and in systems of civil administration—not only by Japan, but by Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore. In 1979, it would be outclassed again—militarily—in a short war with Vietnam (Vogel, 2011: 526–35). Well before it was deemed politically safe to put the “Gang of Four” on public trial in 1981, it became evident that the general direction of travel for the nation was being firmly altered. The future would not be about continuing class struggle, but about catching up and modernizing in all sectors—agriculture, industry, science/technology, and the military—so as to build an economy capable of supporting and defending a Chinese population already projected with certainty to grow well beyond one billion before century’s end.

Efforts to sustain resounding uniformity in party messaging and temporal simultaneity in the public’s social/political experience would be significantly downplayed in favor of unapologetically improvisational and consciously staggered approaches (Ang, 2016; Huang, 2012). “Reform and opening” was the new leadership line. “Reform” signaled reducing the role of the central state in planning and managing the economy; giving more leeway and responsibility to local-level officials and gradually allowing markets to set more prices for goods, labor, land, and eventually even capital. “Opening” meant gradually allowing foreign trade, investment, technologies, and tastes into China’s economy and social life. A degree of centering, simultaneity, and synchronization were to be sacrificed then, permitting some to get rich first.

New (party-state-delineated) spaces for economic trial and error were duly carved out, attracting and channeling investment into selected Special Economic Zones and “keypoint” projects. This daring departure would release previously stifled energies, generate great ambition, and create undreamt-of opportunities and concentrations of wealth (Cartier, 2001, 2002; Zeng, 2010). Meanwhile, other zones, enterprises, industrial sectors, and whole regions of the country were left on their own to catch up, adjust, and survive as best they could. Thus the embedded logics of Mao-era spatial assemblages and temporal disciplines would be eroded only piecemeal; in staggered sequences and at separate speeds in separated settings. By actively encouraging novel, uneven spaces and paces for development to emerge, the party center forfeited some of its capacity to radiate a common message over all, and make that message credibly resonant everywhere, for everyone. That uneven unravelling of long-prevailing social orderings yielded thrilling new prospects, even as it generated protracted social dislocation and pain, pronounced new levels and forms of exploitation and inequity (Khan and Riskin,
2001; Riskin, Zhao, and Li, 2001), ferocious urban sprawl, environmental degradation, and vast corruption (Ang, 2020). With few effective remedies for these unfamiliar forms of social suffering as yet in place, the fundamental moral authority of the party center inevitably became more attenuated, and would, time and again, be both covertly resisted and angrily contested.

**Times Out of Joint: China’s Fraught “Fin de Siècle”**

If for Europe the 1880s and 1890s were a famously fraught epoch—intermingling decadence and cynicism with innovations and soaring hopes for the future—so too it would be for China, one century later. The best benefits of Deng’s earliest reforms were reaped in rural areas, as farm prices were raised, labor inputs and outputs diversified, and private enterprise and efficiency were encouraged and rewarded. These trends triggered anxiety and resentment among hitherto relatively privileged urban groups, however, as inflation gathered pace, job and benefit securities, and the reassuring hierarchies of social status and prestige that for so long had come with urban/state-sector employment, were shaken. These apprehensions, when linked with other (elite and popular) demands for a “fifth modernization” of more democracy, culminated in the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations and their ultimate suppression by military force, both of which were televised around the globe (Vogel, 2011: 595–639).

Recoiling from the more extreme calls for “wholesale Westernization” made by some intellectual leaders in the democracy movement (Kraus, 1989), others had begun projects of reassembling, out of China’s own past ethical frames and philosophical traditions, what they hoped could be more recognizably Sinic sets of practices and aesthetics for a modernizing moral/political authority no longer to be rooted in proletarian-revolutionary ideals (Song, 2003; Bell, 2008; Solé-Farràs 2008). This elite reprise of ancient civilizational codes, sensibilities, and values would reach a certain culmination in the party’s very public re-embrace of the teachings of Confucius in the early 2000s. It was to score a great victory in 2004, as Beijing dipped a first toe into the whirl of international soft power competition and the sage was selected as the standard bearer for Chinese civilization in a rollout of Confucius Institutes around the globe.

However, still other groups in China’s rapidly diversifying society—non-philosophers and non-elites—were increasingly seeking spiritual solace, better health, personal renewal, and sometimes also enhanced status in the practice of non-Confucian aspects of customary culture, such as qigong, traditional Chinese medicine, and in the sociality of lineage and temple life (Chen, 1995, 2003; Chau, 2006). The upsurge in folk belief and popular
religion, largely tolerated by the CCP during this period, provided social cover for the emergence of assorted charismatic sects, some taking advantage of new market networks, social spaces, and communications technologies (like cassette tapes) to gather large (and generally far less educated) masses of enthusiastic followers. It was one of these spiritual groups, Falun Gong, that just a decade beyond the pro-democracy demonstrations, would stage a peaceful protest of its own at the Tiananmen-adjacent party compound of Zhongnanhai sharply challenging once again (but from quite a breathtakingly different set of values) the CCP’s moral right and fitness to rule (Shue, 2002). Like the democracy protestors before them, Falun Gong organizers, and their disciples scattered over various parts of the country, would be pitilessly tracked down and silenced.

Throughout these two decades, construction of all kinds boomed, inscribing starkly contrasting, shoddily fabricated spaces for living and working upon the land, and raising serious concerns about sprawling land-use patterns. Towns haphazardly spread out into small cities, and cities exploded in population and administrative complexity, as rural migrant laborers flooded in seeking jobs. With markets proliferating, people did more and more of their trading with profit-maximizing strangers. Everyone everywhere worried—warning each other agitatedly—about the ubiquity of scams, counterfeits, and frauds. Consumerist desires continued being fanned, nonetheless, by commercial advertising and a dazzling array of tempting new products. Public green spaces turned into litter dumps and watercourses into fetid sewers as urban China—where not long before no rag or bone would readily have been surrendered—sank into the throw-away culture of careless consumption. A widespread obsession with gift giving and receiving took hold across a drastically destabilized social landscape—cash-camouflaging gestures calculated to cultivate good relations (guanxi 关系) with persons now in positions to provide favors and scarce resources. Countless bottles of Chinese spirits (baijiu 白酒)—and, later, expensive imported brandies—would change hands over those years.

Styles of dress diversified too, as society—now unashamedly—became more stratified. High-level political leaders made the switch to Western business suits and ties. Local-level cadres, by contrast, favored smart leather jackets, carried beepers, and donned athletic shoes. Town and village enterprise bosses 乡镇企业老板 sported gold neck chains and dark glasses. Older women curled their hair and young women rushed to work in the mornings decked out in frilly frocks more suitable for an evening dance party than a day at the office. All day avenues plied almost exclusively by silent cyclists just a decade earlier seemed permanently tangled in tense traffic jams of exhaust-spewing trucks, cars, and cheap motorbikes. In the evenings, brightly
lighted market stalls and restaurants spilled out into city streets and alleyways. Day or night it seemed, China’s jumble of new urban lifestyles—from the most opulent to the most abject—were performed amid a continuous din of impatiently honking car horns.

The soundtrack of party propaganda messaging was, at that time, often just drowned out by the traffic noise. And as for the musical soundtracks of those topsy-turvy times, those too became unexpectedly fragmented and jarring, as the outmoded repertoire of folk/revolutionary/socialist songs was discarded. Elders enjoyed listening to Chinese opera; youngsters hummed along to dreamy love songs coming in (first on cassette tapes, then on compact discs) from pop idols in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Masses of more disillusioned youths thrilled to the provocative lyrics, hybrid rhythms, and electric guitars at sold-out concerts by controversial rock musician Cui Jian. Others sang their own hearts out at karaoke bars. Meanwhile, for those foreign businessmen and tourists passing through China’s international airports, living and dining in China’s upscale hotels, and shopping in its shiniest new malls it must sometimes have seemed that the (ingratiatingly yearning yet upbeat) recordings of easy-listening megastar/pianist Richard Clayderman were all but impossible to escape. A few new radio stations even began catering to classical music lovers, too, and better-off parents could now afford to give their only children private music lessons. China’s conservatories were already training some of the world’s finest young musicians when, in 1994, at age 12, child prodigy Lang Lang took top prize in his first international piano competition.

The performance of authority and power in China was becoming decidedly disjointed through the 1980s and 1990s as well. Repeated—sometimes profoundly threatening—popular challenges to the party’s moral substance were mounted over those years. Friction heightened between Han and other ethnic groups in western regions of the country, producing violent outbreaks of protest, terror attacks, and startled state repression. Farmers everywhere, no longer favored by the latest macroeconomic twists along the route of market reform, and suffering under exploitative local tax levies, rose in more and more frequent (if always episodic) protest (Bernstein and Lü, 2003). Many who looked on from outside came to believe that with so much systemic rot, anger, and resistance floating to the surface the center could not hold in Beijing: there would either be a breakup of the system along regional lines, a full-on “collapse” (like the one in the Soviet Union), or some other form of swift transition away from CCP rule, most probably in the direction of democracy.

But ceding the party’s monopoly on power had never been part of Deng’s plan. Ways would have to be found, instead, for the party to “modernize”
even itself. Never conceding for an instant its sole claim on legitimate rulership, the party began, instead, dramatically upping its own governance game. Talent was recruited from broadened sectors of society and given better technical and managerial training. Cadre performance started being systematically evaluated, with promotions awarded only in accordance with specified criteria of responsibility and experience (Pieke, 2009; Lee, 2015; Naughton and Yang, 2004). Pains were taken, as well, for the CCP to begin re-inserting itself into social and economic spaces—neighborhoods and private housing developments, corporations, and non-state social service organs—which had threatened to mushroom messily beyond its general supervision (Dickson, 2008; Bray, 2008, 2009; Thornton, 2012). Useful “foreign experiences” were eagerly sought out and learned from, laying the groundwork for better systems of regulatory oversight and increasingly technology-supported, data-driven policy planning and management (Yang, 2004; Pieke, 2012; Ang, 2020).

Starting from the mid-1990s, a conscious agenda of catching up to the best world standards in the sciences and engineering was also pursued. Enormous investments were made in raising the quality of Chinese technical schools and universities as hundreds of thousands of Chinese students were sent abroad for higher education and training, especially in the sciences and engineering—more than half going to U.S. universities and institutes. By about 2009 China would pull ahead of Japan to rank third in the world (behind only the US and the EU) in gross expenditure on research and development (Freeman and Huang, 2015). Better scientific and technical skills, plus new attitudes acquired through participation in international organizations such as the World Bank, gradually helped the party recalibrate and better sequence the pace and shape of its own national economic and social development. All this dramatic upscaling eventually emboldened the party center to return again, around the turn of the century, to projects of comprehensive spatial reordering, this time on a far grander scale, in pursuit of ever more ambitious programs for poverty alleviation, population resettlement, and “future-proofed,” sustainable patterns of accelerated urbanization and rural reorganization (Ma, 2005; Ma and Wu, 2005; Jaros, 2019).21

Keen to apply lessons learned from commercial advertising formats culled from around the world, the apparatus of party propaganda itself was also gradually transformed in style, content, tech-savviness, and targeted messaging. Digital communications and satellite technology swiftly blanketed virtually the entire country with color television. Its historical melodramas, programs on etiquette, art appreciation, foreign travel, and civic mindedness beamed out non-stop, along with nightly weather forecasts (tianqi yubao 天气预报) for “all under Heaven” (tianxia 天下) that, indicatively rattling
through the major cities, once more re-described for viewers the far reaches of the realm: Beijing, Nanjing, Hong Kong, Haikou, Kunming, Lhasa, Urumqi, Hohhot, Harbin.

High-production-value cinematic releases, fusing storylines celebrating the swashbuckling glories of China’s imagined past with the excitement and patriotic delight evoked by cutting-edge sound and visual technologies, became important markers in successive waves of mass cultural consumption. Especially as these became increasingly professionally packaged with associated market trends and fads in fashion, celebrity, cosmetic surgery, bodybuilding, fan magazines, awards ceremonies, talent shows, and the like. At times, the intended resonance of the party’s propaganda messages was fused and blended so thoroughly into the kaleidoscopic aesthetics of prosperity, modernity, and consumerism that the embedded political-cultural lessons on “spiritual civilization” and national pride became barely distinguishable from individual experiences of commodity desire, and its satisfaction (Zhao, 2008; Brady, 2008; Broudehoux, 2004; Thornton, 2010). In sum, while sorely challenged by economic distortions and social disorders largely of its own making throughout this period, and while openly mistrusted by most—even publicly mocked and scorned by many—the CCP of this era never relinquished its role as “sacred” source of legitimate authority, and never sequestered itself from public view. On the contrary, it was all too drearily visible on television every day, winter or summer, in good times and in worse, convening meetings and congresses, taking notes, greeting dignitaries, making inspection tours, issuing reports, giving speeches, and replastering its urban billboards with firm (but genial) “public service messages” (Esarey, Stockmann, and Zhang, 2017). The party preserved its ritual practice of periodically “summing up” its own wisdom, too; in progressively long-winded formulations signaling its own continuous progress toward perfection. To Deng’s “seek truth from facts” and “reform and opening,” Jiang Zemin would add “the three represents” and “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” To that already unwieldy incantation, Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao would later append “a harmonious society” and “a scientific outlook.”

Repetitive speech acts like these were ceaselessly offered up, in reverent tones, like prayers ceremonially recited from imperial ritual prayer boards.

**Back to the Future: Recovering Chinese “History,” “Civilization,” and the Cosmos Too**

To mark the turn of the millennium in Beijing, the enormous China Millennium Monument was opened to the public by Jiang Zemin. This single edifice, designed under the party’s aegis in celebration of time past, would, in
reality, disclose so much more about the way forward. The splendors of Chinese “history,” imperial “civilization”—and, yes, even “the cosmos” itself—the monument portended, were all to be making a resounding comeback. The first Beijing building to be constructed in the shape of an altar since the Ming dynasty, the monument boasts the world’s largest and heaviest rotating rotunda (representing Heaven), resting on a massive pyramidal stone base (representing Earth). It is topped with a large “Time and Space Probing Pin” which pierces the sky at a 45-degree angle symbolizing, according to the original China Travelpage website (now defunct), the “eternal extension of time and space” and expressing the Chinese people’s spirit of “innovation and exploration.” The pin “contains high-tech elements and advanced sound, light and power” installations, and is intended to remind visitors of “the sundial in the Forbidden City.” On the monument’s northern side, there is a sunken square wherein burns an eternal flame, a “holy fire” which “originated at the site of Peking Man.” A giant water feature, with two “ever-flowing” streams representing China’s Yellow River, is also incorporated into the design. An uninterrupted, arrow-straight, 232-meter-long “bronze corridor” leading the visitor to the foot of the altar lays out “the 5,000-year course of Chinese civilization.”

With this flourish, after two perilous decades of political-aesthetic incoherence under “reform and opening,” the outlines of a refreshed symbology of power, crafted by the CCP to befit the new age, began resolving into focus. How jubilantly it joined its high-tech trappings with its elemental references to Heaven, Earth, fire, water, and metal; how insouciantly it reprised that very same set of space/time-ordering motifs that the empire had so long deployed—before those had been discarded forever, or so many had believed, in republican revolution, almost a century before.

*Birds’ Nest to Belt and Road*

Few who saw the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics in real time will have forgotten it.23 Several perceptive commentaries decoding the proceedings, by culture, arts, and media studies scholars and others, are already on record (Barmé, 2009; Lawson, 2011; Gong, 2012; and, relatedly, Collins, 2008; Haugen, 2008). And any observer who was already attentive to the symbolic representations of Chinese history, national identity, and aspirations for the future inscribed in the China Millennium Monument would not have been much surprised by the general format of the Olympic production, pairing image after image evoking China’s glorious past with limitless possibilities for its future. Just a few of the most relevant elements in the overall aesthetic conveyed by that opening ceremony and all that led up to
it—relating to matters of spatiotemporal ordering and resonance—need be underscored here, therefore.

**Spaces.** Beijing Airport’s brand-new Terminal 3, financed by hundreds of millions in foreign bank loans and completed in time for the 2008 Olympics, was then the largest in the world—a spectacle, on its own, of gleaming modernity, efficiency, convenience, and courteous service designed to impress all foreign visitors attending the Games. The Beijing Subway underwent a major modernization and extension for the occasion as well. Mammoth projects of demolition, urban renovation, and cleaning and greening were carried out in central city areas, amid choruses of controversy and complaint. Giant spaces were given over to build the state-of-the-art Beijing National Aquatics Center; the Olympic Green studded with shiny new buildings, parks, shopping plazas; numerous other sports venues; an imposing broadcast tower; and of course the striking “Birds’ Nest” stadium, where the opening ceremony would take place. In this effort, some of the most celebrated planners and architects from around the world were recruited and retained to contribute their talents to what amounted to nothing less than an integrated, ultra-modern re-spatialization and redesign of the nation’s capital for a global age.24

The Birds’ Nest itself, built to comfortably accommodate some 91,000 ticketholders, was fitted out with cutting-edge sound and lighting equipment, multiple overhead screens for simultaneous projection of images, as well as miles of translucent sheeting and wiring for aerial acrobatics and special-effects displays. Celebrity historical-epic film director Zhang Yimou oversaw the opening ceremony, with which China, now decidedly “on the rise,” was billed as introducing itself to a global audience; the first several segments of the production, ingeniously depicting the splendors of China’s deep past, turned out to be far more memorable than those in the shorter second segment, gesturing toward Chinese dreams for the future.25

**Times, Timing, and Musical Resonances.** The ancient sundial was accorded pride of place once again, its image projected at the very outset of the gala performance as the enigmatic face across which the alternations of shadow and light (yin-yang) had been silently recording the countdown to the very last minute and last second before the Games’ opening; a precise timing momentously set, with all conceivable calendrical auspiciousness, for exactly eight minutes past eight p.m. (Beijing time, of course) on the eighth day of the eighth month of the year 2008. Zhang Yimou’s own yin-yang references—in his repeated utilization of sudden onsets of pitch darkness in the stadium (concealing cast and set changes on the floor), followed by just as
sudden, blazing applications of white or color-tinted lighting (revealing each spectacular new tableau to view)—yielded several of the production’s most awe-inspiring effects. None earned more loud appreciation from the crowd than the very first sound-and-light spectacle, featuring no fewer than 2,008 identically costumed male drummers beating 2,008 mighty, elaborately-decorated ancient-style drums in perfect unison, and with dramatically stylized gestures and synchronized athleticism—the amplified resonance of their drumbeats triggering an intake of breath and an involuntary sensation of thrill in the solar plexus of every listener. Leave it to Zhang Yimou to select the resonance of those “thunderous, almost intimidating . . . ritualistically choreographed” beating drums (Lawson, 2011: 6) to proclaim the hour, as of old; on this occasion affirming just what time it was, not only for those dwelling in a single city, but for all who would hearken, round the globe.

Flawlessly synchronized movements executed by multitudes of identically costumed performers formed the major motifs of the action, portraying a host of significant Chinese cultural accomplishments and technical innovations in earlier times. As in the China Millennium Monument, China’s long past was once more represented as an uninterrupted and progressive flow—this time assuming the form of a horizontal scroll painting, projected onto the floor of the stadium, smoothly and steadily unrolling itself to reveal shifting scenes and passing events. There were no scenes of conquest, conflict, or struggle to be found, though. Nothing at all about wars, or famines; or revolution. Much attention was given instead to Chinese arts and artisanship, to technical invention and discovery (paper, silk, tea, and navigation, for example), creative performance (dance, puppetry), the written/printed word (calligraphy, the invention of movable type), and the sound of human voices declaiming texts and chanting in turn. Of all the Chinese characters that flashed in and out of view, however, just one was specifically highlighted for the audience: “harmony” 和.

There followed much more music too; lutes, flutes, bells, drums and cymbals, and various other string and wind instruments playing tunes evocative of the old Silk Road in the historical part; in the contemporary/futurist portion of the show, a sentimental duet about all of us being part of one family, some sweet children’s choruses, and an otherworldly sounding synthesized interlude (reminiscent of early Star Trek soundtracks) for the space travel scenes. All of that was topped off by Lang Lang, dressed (to resemble an angel, perhaps) in a white satin tuxedo and seated, on high, at a pure white baby grand piano, playing—in one final celestial reference—a lyrical excerpt from noted native composer Ye Xiaogang’s new “Starry Sky Concerto.” The spectacular welcoming performance finally closed with multiple bursts of fireworks—yet another Chinese invention, of course, and a perennial feature
of the action at Chinese weddings and on other auspicious occasions, symbolically scaring off any evil spirits that might still be hanging about in the “immanence” of the cosmic surround. The host, Premier Hu Jintao, in the company of top Olympic Committee officials, presided that evening, betraying little emotion as usual; but he must have been gratified to witness this carefully edited narrative of the nation, concocted on his watch, now represented to the world with such conviction and flair, and without any apparent technical glitches.

**Latter-Day Literati.** While Hu Jintao remained at the top—pursuing a more “collective” style of leadership, deeply informed by inputs from technical experts and specialists—the wider public craze for “national studies” had continued running its course. As part of that “fever,” statues of Confucius, along with shrines for veneration of many other ancient figures, historical and mythical, had been going up all over China. The Yellow Emperor, and even the phoenix, were popular favorites, too. Still, as everyone knew, the very public rehabilitation of Confucius—so despised since Mao’s Cultural Revolution—carried special political significance. With all the emphasis then being put by Beijing on science and on technical proficiency and managerial efficiency it was looking, for a time, as if it was going to be China’s latter-day Confucian literati—its rising engineers, systems designers, and civil-service-exam-tested technocrats—who were destined to inherit the mantle of revolution after all, once more presiding learnedly over the land.

Then, in 2011, just as the Hu administration would have been preparing to hand over the reins of power to its successor, there was some awkward embarrassment at home, and no little surprise abroad, about a grand statue of Confucius abruptly erected in Beijing, entirely without public fanfare. This particular 30-foot-high bronze figure of the great sage was hauled up onto an outdoor plinth at the north entrance to the National Museum, adjacent to Tiananmen Square, and just to the east of the Mao Mausoleum. Given the political sensitivity of such a central placement, there unsurprisingly ensued much sarcastic commentary on Chinese social media. With no official explanation forthcoming, speculation would become only more enflamed when, several weeks later, just as mysteriously as it had appeared (and under cover of darkness, at that), the statue was removed. Some wags scornfully surmised that “pro-Confucius” (status quo supporting?) political forces had attempted to steal a march on “pro-Mao” (leadership transition supporting?) political forces before the handover to Xi could become a fait accompli. We may never learn what actually went on behind the scenes at that juncture. But it is notable that, since Xi has been at the helm, while much tribute continues to be paid to Confucius, his disciples and their thought, more social space has also
been allowed for other forms of spiritual expression and practice, including Daoism, popular Buddhism, shrines to local gods, temple life, and even to some of the mantic arts and divination (Johnson, 2017; Bell, 2015; Li, 2018).

Xi Jinping: “Seeing Like an Empire”

With so much remedial recuperation of imperial-era political symbols and sensibilities already accomplished by the party under Jiang and Hu, it has remained to Xi only to reinforce this, while pressing on (still further) to recover the very legitimacy of “empire” itself. This he would set about doing soon enough, but not before taking two notable preliminary steps. First, he began dusting off and reviving for the party something of its long-lost “serve the people” image. A publicity campaign was launched highlighting and lauding the scrupulously moral, upright, sincere, even self-sacrificing service of selected hardworking CCP members (mostly at lower levels). This nationwide campaign was designed as a corrective both to the manifest official corruption (and consequent public resentment) that had been permitted to fester under Jiang and to the patronizingly aloof, bureaucratic/rational tone so often set by macro-planning party officials under Hu. Thus Xi launched his own chairmanship with a crusade against corruption of all kinds within the party ranks—from the petty to the scandalously depraved. Unmistakably, his very top priority was one of cleaning and polishing the public’s perception of the CCP—that vessel it was his intention to set forth, once again, as the “sacred” space at the heart of China’s political system. Secondly, Xi set to work on some serious recentering of energy, purpose, and potency within that party—and in himself. Notoriously becoming “chairman of everything,” he systematically reconfigured the hierarchies of major party, governmental, and military policy-setting and coordinating bodies, so that all bureaucratic reporting lines would ultimately converge with him.

Mutatis mutandis, we might say, Xi was resuming the positioning in the polity once presumed to be held by emperors. The emperor’s position, as elaborated above, had not primarily been to exert individual/dictatorial control per se; but rather to personify, in himself, the one space/time locus at which, to return to Aihe Wang, all the “infinite oppositions” inherent in the universe of forces at play “came into proximity and dynamically interacted with one another” (Wang, 2000: 208); the one point at which “diverse compositions of power contested and constrained one another, yet could be united” (Wang, 2000: 215). The one place in space/time akin to the “emptiness” where the spokes of a wheel join.

That ancient imperial positioning, importantly, was not at all akin to the kind of personal magnetism or charisma we would associate, today, with a
modern/authoritarian “cult of personality.” For from that ultimately hollow position of “supreme centering,” symbolically capturing the distilled energy of all forces at play, the emperor’s chief responsibility as governor had not been to gather up popular support for himself, but rather to “radiate” and “resonate” the “positive energy” concentrated in him, over all his realm. Accordingly, Xi has been nothing if not a robust advocate of enhancing and strengthening party propaganda and thought work. At a 2013 national meeting on “publicity and theoretical work,” he called that sphere of work “the key to success,” while laying out his own clear sense of the difficult challenges ahead and the critical role that would have to be played by party propaganda/education in meeting those challenges:

An important platform for publicity and theoretical work is the stressing of unity, stability and encouragement, and putting the focus on positive publicity. We are new to a battle with many new historic features. We are facing unprecedented challenges and difficulties. Therefore, we must continue to enhance and intensify the underlying trend of thought in our country... popularize positive energy, and encourage the whole country to strive as one for progress. (Xi, 2014: 173).26

Nor was Xi intending to rely, in the party’s vital “thought work,” only on the written (or spoken) word; far less on tedious slogans and turgid ideological treatises. In a speech to a Politburo group study session in early 2014 he made clear his own vision of the party’s crucial need (and responsibility) to embrace both old and new forms of culture and creativity, every day and everywhere—drenching the whole social landscape, saturating even the ambient atmosphere—and sinking its messages home to people’s hearts and minds:

Like spring drizzle falling without a sound, we should disseminate the core socialist values in a gentle and lively way by making use of all kinds of cultural forms. We should inform the people by means of fine literary works and artistic images what is the true, the good and the beautiful, what is the false, the evil and the ugly, and what should be praised and encouraged, and what should be opposed and repudiated. (Xi, 2014: 183).

Here Xi could not have been clearer in expressing his own conception of that very quality of sympathetic resonance he meant to achieve—with help from the whole party—over all corners and into all crannies of the realm. The party could not settle merely for getting people to listen and obey. It must, rather, strive to touch people’s hearts with the truth and the beauty of the party’s ideals and its mission; stirring and inspiring them not to obedience, but to wish for themselves to be part of the good work of the party.
A big ask, yes. But fortunately for Xi the days of relying largely on simple musical resonance—on revolutionary/folk tunes to carry party propaganda into people’s hearts—have long gone. The augmented messaging Xi called for has been powered instead by truly startling technological advances coming to fruition at rapid pace under his administration, especially in mobile communications, big data, artificial intelligence, facial recognition, and robotics. China over the past decade has sped to the forefront in pioneering cutting-edge, if also exceedingly controversial and manipulative, systems for social ordering, “de-risking,” and policing. These include not only systems of internet censorship and street-level surveillance, but also China’s ever more pervasive social credit systems and increasingly mobile e-governance mechanisms (McKinnon, 2011; Mozur, 2019; Creemers, 2018; Strittmatter, 2019; Kostka, 2019; Song and Cornford, 2006). Many of these have been developed through state–private partnerships with commercial platforms, delivering SMS messaging and marketing services, now put to work not only for urban suppliers and consumers, but also deep into the farm sector, as well as transnationally (Latham, 2009; Burnay, 2019). Not forgetting either, now that mobile phones have been dropped conveniently into everyone’s pockets, the recent required downloading and daily use by all party members themselves of the Xi Jinping Thought app (Kuo and Lyons, 2019). In some spheres where high-tech reconnaissance and tracking has been deployed—as in the surveillance of Uighurs, their mass forced detentions and re-education, the destruction of mosques, and other measures adopted by Beijing to suppress Muslim culture and belief—the condemnation from abroad has been pronounced, although not always as strongly voiced by other Muslim leaders or complicit corporate interests around the world as might have been expected (Feng, 2018; “China’s global power damps criticism of Uighur crackdown,” 2019; Wee and Mozur, 2019; Smith Finley, 2019).

But, of course, incurring China’s displeasure can now invite more grievous penalties than used to be the case. Xi’s resumption of imperial frames and stylistics in domestic affairs has been matched by an embrace of empire-like logics, motives, and methods in the conduct of China’s foreign relations. With his early articulation of the “China Dream”—restoring the country to great power status and to prosperity—he was initially perceived by analysts as pursuing a heightened form of essentially “nationalist” reasoning and rhetoric. But there is more than love of country and protection of its interests at play here. Xi’s time at the helm has been distinguished by an ever-growing appetite in Beijing for speaking plainly and intervening more boldly, often pre-emptively and even provocatively, on the world stage, to secure China’s expanding economic and geostrategic interests, and enable its projection of much greater influence over global affairs (Eisenman and Heginbotham, 2018). This has led
many now to observe that Xi’s foreign policy is not just nationalistic, but empire-like. And in this global sphere of politics, too, China has appeared more than ready to explicitly redeploy elements of a revived Sinic imperial/historical frame, aesthetic, and sense of prerogative. The astonishing infrastructural and financial ambitions associated with Xi’s multilateral Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and his Eurasia-bridging Belt and Road Initiative have, so far, received the most apprehensive concern from interested powers around the world. But other, even more globe-spanning, tech-enabled dreams articulated in Beijing—such as repositioning itself as a “near-Arctic power” and one day building and running an ultra-high-voltage global power grid—have been setting off alarms as well (Brady, 2017; Woon, 2020; Kynge and Hornby, 2018). Meanwhile, Beijing spares no effort or expense to promote Chinese culture and “soft power” wherever it can.

Xi and party intellectuals close to him now even weave together novel—decidedly non-Marxist—histories of China as empire, and of empire as the driving force in past, and future, global history. Peking University law professor and political theorist Jiang Shigong 强世功, for example, recently contributed a particularly cool and straightforward statement of the case for (indeed, the historical “inevitability” of) constructing a new world empire, this time with China and Chinese values setting the tone and the common terms for future global cooperation and endeavor. At least since the time of the early maritime revolution, Jiang argues, empires ceased being territorially bounded entities, becoming globe-spanning “world” empires instead. Since the end of the Cold War the prevailing world empire—U.S.-led—has faced resistance from Russia and competition from China. This ongoing competition, Jiang firmly asserts, must be frankly understood as “a struggle to become the heart of the world empire.” The presently waning U.S.-led world empire, according to his analysis, now faces “three great unsolvable problems: the ever-increasing inequality created by the liberal [global] economy; state failure, political decline and ineffective governance caused by [American-encouraged] political liberalism; and decadence and nihilism caused by [Western] cultural liberalism.” And, as he concludes, “the civilization that is able to provide genuine solutions” to these three great problems “will also provide the blueprint for” the new world empire that is to come (Jiang, 2019: 8–9).

**Conclusion**

This overview of CCP political legitimation work has underlined its enduring ambition to radiate out over the people and sustain among them a keen sensation of dynamic energy and purpose. That sense of purpose, conceptualized as a force initially distilled within the core of the party itself and then actively...
diffused across all its domain, was intended to penetrate into the hearts and minds of every individual—there to generate, through a process akin to sympathetic resonance, a vibrant response, a hum and a purr of popular recognition and assent to CCP rule.

This distinctive ambition, it has been argued, borrowed some of its inspiration from concepts and practices of political legitimation first articulated and refined within the cosmological frames of very early Chinese thought and governing practice. And like past imperial authority legitimation practices, CCP practice has been marked by repetitive cycles of centering, ordering, synchronizing, pacing, and ritualized performance. Successive top party leadership coalitions have all remained sharply attentive to maintaining the consistent flow and density of party propaganda messaging at every period. Mao-era proletarian purism, however, very nearly caused the entire political edifice it had constructed to implode in internecine struggle and retribution. The unbridled modernist pragmatism of the Deng era, by contrast, nearly caused what had become a deliberately (but very dangerously) disarticulated political edifice to dissolve. Only once that risk-taking revolutionary first generation of CCP leaders had finally left the scene has a consciously orchestrated recovery of party control been steadily carried out—one distinguished by its well-choreographed reappropriation of selected ancient/imperial symbols, motifs, and political-philosophical stylistics for regenerating and projecting political authority that resonates. Xi Jinping’s rulership mode, then, represents but the current culmination of what has been a lengthy political restoration effort. With him, it has become acceptable again even to embrace the very name of empire, along with more and more of its old ideals, and mystifications. How fortuitous that these ideals and mystifications can now be whisked so artfully together into perpetually “handy” text message reminders, kept continually afloat across the length and breadth of a panopticon architecture, enabled by twenty-first-century cyber technologies.

When choosing to supplement the standard (organizational/ideological) approaches of modern political analysis with close consideration of symbolic or aesthetic dimensions of power systems, as has been done here, it need not automatically be supposed that such systems of meaning, once decoded, can be useful only in highlighting the uniqueness, exceptionality, or inimitability of the particular system under study. For such equally indispensable dimensions of legitimate power and rule may well also be susceptible to rigorous, systematic comparison and theory-building. China, we might begin by noting after all, is not alone among great societies that underwent a modern social revolution in the twentieth century only now to be experiencing episodes of nostalgia for empire, in the twenty-first. Similar phenomena are to be found in the “memory politics” of both Turkey and Russia today, for example,
where nostalgia for the manifold glories of the Ottoman Empire and for the prerевolutionary expansiveness of Tsarist Russia play distinct roles in both nations’ contemporary domestic and international political discourses (Yavuz, 2020; Laruelle and Karnysheva, 2021). Arguably, a similar nostalgia for empire may even be animating central problems in the development of twenty-first century U.S. politics (Chaudet, Parmentier, and Pélopidas, 2009). Importantly, however, China could turn out to be the only one among today’s nostalgic power regimes actually in possession of the domestic support, economic heft, and technological capacities, if it chooses, to go some distance toward making such an imperial-style revisioning of the global future into a lived reality, for very many people, in very many places around the globe.

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Notes

1. When a harp is well tuned and a harpist plays just one simple four-note chord on it, for example, every one of the other strings on the harp will come into sympathetic resonance, producing a light, consonant hum that deepens and uplifts, supports and enhances, the depth and harmony of the chord. If she then muffles the original four strings and stops them vibrating, all the other strings will continue their gentle vibration for quite some time, until finally, all sound does die away. Given the many meditations and disputations on the relation of music to morality and to power that philosophers of politics and social governance in early China left in those records passed down to us (Sterckx, 2000; Brindley, 2007, 2006; Rom, 2019; Jo, 2017; Cook, 1995; Garrison 2012) the suggestion is that the “harmony” they aspired to achieve in human affairs was not (as often supposed today) straightforward unanimity; but instead a phenomenon of sympathetic resonance akin to that familiar to musicians and their audiences.
As Wang (2000: 2) explains, “Chinese cosmology, as such a framework of con-
ceptions and relations, is an immense system of correlation-building, based on
interlaced pairs (correlated to Yin-Yang 阴阳), fours (correlated to the four direc-
tions), fives (correlated to the Five Phases or Wuxing 五行), eights (correlated to
the Eight Trigrams), and so on.”

Hall and Ames (1995: 258–59, 265–66) present some illustrative chartings
drawn from Han (sifang and wuxing) cosmology correlating seasons (say, winter
and spring), with directions (north and east), colors (black and green), numbers
(six and eight), elements (wood and water), as well as with different musical
instruments, notes and pitches, and with flavors, foods, animals, animal organs,
and the gods to whom offerings of these should be made.

Each phase being associated with an element such as earth, wood, metal, fire,
and water, wuxing has sometimes been translated as “five elements”; sometimes
as “five processes.”

Schneewind (2018: 11–12) demonstrates how, many centuries later under the
Ming, elite and popular political discourses on “public vice and virtue” and on
praise or blame for particular local officials, continued to be constructed within
the frameworks of these much earlier cosmological categories of correlation. By
that later period, however, the imagined field of forces had become a still more
intensely “resonant” cosmos (of “movement and response”)—one stretched
wider, to encompass many “lesser spirits” including the “spirits of dead humans,”
and even, controversially, the righteous spirits of worthy men still living.

See Zito, 1997, for more on the Qing emperor’s ritual performance as pivot of
the cosmos. And on the Qing emperor’s representation as pivot of empire, with
certain interesting reservations, see Crossley (1999: 51). On the CCP as a latter-
day “sacred void,” a concept borrowed from the work of anthropologist David
Parkin—which “travels rather well to contemporary China”—see Pieke (2016:
26–27).

By Qing times (and probably very much earlier than that) public time-telling
with drumbeats had been extended (by human voices) still deeper into the alley-
ways of the imperial capital, as night watchmen—many of them trustworthy
beggars compensated with “donations” collected largely from local shopkeep-
ers—patrolled their neighborhoods at two-hour intervals through the night, cry-
ing out reassuringly, to any who might lie awake, “All is in peace and order-r-r!”
(Lu, 2005: 111).

Spence (1975: 59) intriguingly translates some seemingly stream-of-consciousness
remarks about the mystical efficacy of the Yi-Jing 取自 from the papers of the
Kangxi emperor, whose reign (1661–1722) came nearly three millennia after
the oracular text’s compilation. The passage reveals the ruler’s concern, even then,
to make the sonorous ritual connection between Heaven and emperor as loud
and clear as possible: “I have never tired of the Book of Changes, and have used
it in fortune-telling and as a source of moral principles; the only thing you must
not do, I told my court lecturers, is to make this book appear simple, for there
are meanings here that lie beyond words. The written word has its limits and its
challenges, for the primal sound in the whole world is that made by the human voice, and the likeness of this human voice must be rendered in dots and strokes. Therefore, I have practiced my . . . calligraphy regularly. . . . Yet I never forget that the voice, too, is important; when my name appears in the invocations to the gods, I tell my ritual officials: Don’t mumble or hesitate. Speak it in a loud voice, clearly, and without fear.”

9. In the Jiangxi Soviet, the Red Army promoted many different forms of political education, including classes, lectures, and newspaper readings. It also instigated opportunities for cultural creation and performance that brought people together in groups. Choral singing (with lyrics in local dialect) was apparently promoted most energetically. But dance troupes, jugglers, and theatrical scriptwriting teams also generated new entertainments. Wall posters, pictorial papers, and woodcuts were made and displayed. And team athletics were promoted too (Judd, 1983; Lötveit, 1973; Kim, 1973: chap. 5). For a close study of CCP “war music” as it evolved later, during the war of resistance against Japan, consult Hung, 1996.

10. See Shue, 2018, however, for other imperial regimes of deliberately differentiated governance which also echoed through in PRC practice.

11. As here: https://digitalcommons.whitworth.edu/chinese_art_posters/68/. One of the slogans incessantly chanted then—“Chairman Mao is the red, red sun in our hearts!”—explicitly figured the energy of the sun, radiated by and through Mao, as reaching into and penetrating the very hearts/minds 心 of the masses. The East is Red was played and sung in public meetings and broadcasts, day and night then, very nearly displacing the national anthem. Originally a folk song, its lyrics were revised after 1949 in praise of Mao as the people’s “savior” 救星 (the second character here meaning literally a star, or a heavenly body—incorporating again the “sun radical”). The second stanza of the song continues in praise of Mao, referring to his love for the people. The third stanza moves on from Mao to the CCP, however, declaring that the Party also resembles the sun: “The Communist Party is like the sun, / Wherever it shines, it is bright. / Wherever the Communist Party is, / Hurrah, the people are liberated!” 共产党, 像太阳, 照到哪里哪里亮. 哪里有了共产党, 呼尔嗨哟, 哪里人民得解放!

12. It also would serve as the site for future popular protests. For two contrasting but powerful readings of the historically and politically charged contentious public space of Tiananmen Square, see Lee, 2009, and Lee, 2011.

13. Urban couples were admonished to wait even longer, with permission to marry not generally forthcoming for women under 25 or men younger than 27. Weddings and funeral ceremonies were targeted for desacralization and simplification as well.

14. Like the Nationalists too, the CCP would ultimately fail to eradicate these; leaving behind texts and ritual paraphernalia, dilapidated ruins, and other loose ends; available for re-suturing together in later revivals and reinventions of those traditions (Dean, 1998; Bruun, 2003; Chen, 1995, 2003; Chau, 2006).

15. For illustrations, see: https://maoeraobjects.ac.uk/object-biographies/wrist watches-%E6%89%8B%E8%A1%A8/. 
16. On the content and distribution of recorded music over this period, see Steen, 2017, and Jones, 2014.

17. “The room where Mao’s remains were to be enshrined is the symbolic center of the Memorial Hall; in the symbolic center of the room would be Mao’s remains; and on the center of Mao’s remains would lie the Communist flag, in the center of which is the Communist symbol, the hammer and sickle” (Wagner, 1992: 392).

18. The 1989 demonstrations gained momentum shortly after the airing of Su Xiaokang and Wang Luxiang’s extraordinary television series, River Elegy. Not with great subtlety, it branded China’s ancient yellow culture as moribund, autocratic, fear-ridden, and servile; contrasting it with an idealized presentation of “the West’s” azure blue culture of innovation, adventurousness, and modern dynamism. The series was eventually banned in China for a while, but not before it had provoked much soul-searching debate in society. See Bodmin and Wan, 1991, for a full transcript of the production, a condensed version of which can still be viewed at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39j4ViRxcS8. See also Wang (1996: 118–36) for a trenchant critique of it.

19. This intellectual quest would swell and intensify into a veritable “fever for national studies” 国学热 which in turn would be “manipulated to accommodate different needs and desires in the contemporary Chinese culture and commodity market” (Xie, 2011: 39). On the fever, see also Makeham, 2011, and Dirlik, 2011.

20. Clayderman’s global smash hit “Ballade pour Adeline,” wildly popular in China then, is available at www.clayderman.co.uk/youtube.

21. For more on coordinated, nationwide land use “master planning” after the turn of the twenty-first century, see also Shue, 2017; and on goals and methods for rural development, Ahlers and Schubert, 2009; Perry, 2011; Bray, 2013.

22. On central leadership “slogans” such as these and how they function in Chinese political life, see Karmazin, 2020.

23. The official video of the entire Olympic opening ceremony remains available to view at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bufV3EgyPGU.

24. Blecher, 2009, captures the urban architectural transformation leading up to the Olympics, as well as the intermittently fraught domestic and international politics of the time.

25. A disproportionate emphasis on historical Chinese accomplishment has remained a feature of Chinese “nation branding” in representing its culture to the world in other global exhibition settings as well. See Chao, 2019.

26. On “positive energy” in propaganda, see also Lu Wei (Minister of the State Internet Information Office), 2013.

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