

## **Media Events Are Still Alive: The Opening Ceremony of the Beijing Olympics as a Media Ritual**

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This article is situated in the scholarly debate over the relevance of the notion of media events in the contemporary social and media environment. In closely reading China Central Television's (CCTV) presentations of the Beijing Olympic Games' opening ceremony to the Chinese audience, the author argues that this mediated ceremony not only has important ritual features that qualify it as a media event, but also is intended to construct a national image rich in cultural meanings in order to consolidate the contemporary Chinese society. In addition, the author shows that the media event's ritual function is also actualized through artistically produced spectacles charged with symbolism operating alongside the documentary live broadcast. This article aims to contribute to the literature on contemporary media rituals through a renewed understanding of media events in a different social and technological context.

In the discussion of television's sociocultural implications, Dayan and Katz's *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (1992) undoubtedly introduced a robust framework to communication scholars. In this book, the authors explicated the live broadcasts of important social events in the Western world in the 1970s and 1980s, labeling these as a genre of television shows they called "media events." The authors drew on the Durkheimian view of rituals as symbolic activities that construct and renew the sense of collectivity in human societies when daily routines are suspended during those rituals. Based on this point, Dayan and Katz analogized the live television broadcast of important social events such as Anwar Sadat's visit to Jerusalem and John Kennedy's funeral to religious rituals.

Dayan and Katz (1992) distinguished media events from daily routine media programs and defined them as a distinct media genre. They held that these live-broadcast and mass-mediated images of important events were so special that they could not fit into the established categories or be fully

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explained by any categorizing formula. In their model, there are three sets of qualifications to define a media event: On the syntactic aspect, a media event should be both an interruption of daily media routines and broadcast live; on the semantic aspect, it has to be presented with reverence and ceremony; and on the pragmatic aspect, it has to excite a large audience and renew loyalty (ibid., pp. 4–14). In satisfying these criteria, the integrative power of the live broadcasting of important social activities, namely media events, exerted similar ritualistic influences on human societies as religious rituals.

However, almost two decades later, the media ecology and social zeitgeist are quite different from those of Sadat's visit to Jerusalem or Kennedy's funeral. Scholars have raised questions regarding the relevancy of the framework of media events in the current social context. One representative argument is made in Katz and Liebes' 2007 article, "No more peace! How disaster, terror and war have upstaged media events," published in this journal. Katz and Liebes recognized the more frequent broadcasts of disruptive events on television and the comparatively less frequent broadcasts of historic events. They give several possible reasons for media events' being upstaged by disaster, terror, and war: First, the technologies and institutional structures have changed in the television industry. They argue that the multiplied channels and the ubiquity and high mobility of television equipment "(1) have scattered the audience and undermined the shared experience of broadcasting, (2) have taken the novelty out of live broadcasting, and (3) have socialized us to 'action' rather than ceremony, to a norm of interruption rather than schedule" (ibid., p. 159). The second reason pertains to the increased cynicism and decreased trust in government and media which have estranged audiences from this genre. Third, disillusion regarding the miracle of media events contributes to their decline. Following Liebes (1998), Katz and Liebes explicated three types of trauma that have moved to center-stage in today's television broadcasts: terror, natural disaster, and war. They also proposed a fourth type, protest or revolution, which was left unelaborated.

Katz and Liebes' (2007) assertions pose a question for scholars studying media and societies: Is it inevitable that the genre of integrative and ceremonial media events will decline and be replaced by frequent broadcasts of disruptive traumas? In their 1988 work "Articulating Consensus: The Ritual and Rhetoric of Media Events," Dayan and Katz differentiated among media events in totalitarian states and those in Western democracies. They stated that, in the West, media events are not "expressions of a given, exclusive meaning. They trigger, instead, hermeneutic attitudes, inviting multiple commentaries" (ibid., p. 163). On the other hand, media events in Eastern Europe are defined in terms of "a pre-existing sort which is authoritatively pronounced effectively" (ibid.). Thus, the answer to the previous question must depend on specific social contexts where cultures, ideologies, and institutional organizations of the media industries differ.

This article argues that, today, the genre of media events is still an effective way to understand integrative media rituals, at least in societies like China. Through analysis of the symbolic production and representations in China Central Television's live broadcast of the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics, this article argues that it has become clear that this event was carefully constructed as a society-wide ritual to consolidate the Chinese society and instill renewed loyalty and pride into the Chinese national identity.

In recent decades, China has been eager to find every opportunity to both boost national confidence domestically and showcase its achievements under the "socialism with Chinese characteristics" to the rest of the world. After losing its bid for the XXVII Olympic Games in 1993 (eventually hosted by

Sydney in 2000), China successfully bid to host other international events, such as the World Horticultural Expo in 1999 and the Universiade in 2001, as a means to accumulate both experience and international recognition. Being selected as the host of the XXIX Olympic Games provided China with a long-awaited opportunity to display the nation's competence on the international stage. In the years following the successful Olympic bid, citizens were mobilized to participate in many massive campaigns, from learning English and "civilized" mannerisms to improving public health. In fact, some foreign media (e.g., Bulman, 2007) have questioned China's obsession with presenting a perfect image for the games, which entailed the remodeling of major cities, the displacement of many poor people, the imprisonment of outspoken political dissidents, and so on.

More important, much facelifting was also done symbolically, especially in the media, as I will analyze later, to create a social experience imbued with carefully constructed meanings of the nation. Sports have played an important role in the construction of a desired national identity in modern China (Fanon, 1990). From the Western invasion of China in the mid-19th century through the early half of the 20th century, the negative stereotypes of the weak Chinese body crystallized into the label of the "sick man of East Asia" [*Dongya bingfu*]. As Brownell, states, "For a century, this phrase has loomed in the Chinese imagination as an insulting label applied to China by Japan and the West" (2008, p. 34). Thus, a sports event hosted by China offered a perfect chance both to show pride in its ancient civilization, and more important, to wipe out the oppression and humiliation that has been implicated in the Chinese body in modern times. Meanwhile, the core symbolic meaning of the Beijing Olympics was not only about the Chinese culture and the Chinese nation in the modern world, but also about the legitimacy of the Chinese government. The games aimed to showcase China's economic advancement, the image of a politically stable and orderly China, and a narrative of China's "achievement of, or return to, international respectability and normal membership in the global community" (deLisle, 2008, p. 25). All in all, the opening ceremony had to be a ritual to celebrate, or even to worship, China's "reinvention for world recognition as an economic, cultural, and social power" (Close, Askew, & Xu, 2007, p. 6), yet still remain benign and harmonious.

The article is organized as an argument consisting of three parts. First, following Dayan and Katz's (1992) conceptualization of media events and Turner's (1974) emphasis on the performative feature of rituals, I argue that ample evidence qualifies China Central Television's live broadcast of the Olympic opening ceremony as a media event staged for the Chinese audience. In addition, through its use of symbolic elements specifically produced for television viewers, this media event provided a ritual framework for the Chinese audience to experience the constructed national identity. Second, I read the cultural performance<sup>2</sup> in the opening ceremony closely to explicate the desired national identity that the media event communicated ritualistically. I argue that it is both the ancient civilization and China's integration into the modern world that were conveyed symbolically in this media ritual. It is through this desired national identity that the media event of the Olympic opening ceremony aimed to integrate contemporary Chinese society in a ritualistic way. Third, based on the qualification of the opening

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<sup>2</sup> This article will not concentrate on the opening ceremony's standard program after the cultural performance, such as the athletes' parade, the declaration of opening, the cauldron lighting, etc. For a detailed analysis of Chinese broadcaster's representation of the Olympic athletes' parades from 1984 to 2008, as well as a comparison of CCTV with non-Chinese broadcasters, see Liang (2011).

ceremony as a media event and the explication of the meanings communicated in the integrative media ritual, I argue for the continued relevancy of the genre of media event as a mediated ceremonial ritual in today's media and social environment.

### **A Sport Spectacle, a Media Event, and a Social Ritual**

The Olympic Games have always been used to communicate cultural meanings among the host and participating countries. A national media organization can also easily deviate from the Olympic theme and "more or less take a national approach" (Liang, 2011, p. 76; see also Rowe, 2013). It is through what Roche (2003) and Close, Askew, and Xu (2007) have called the "mega-event" that various meanings are communicated and goals are achieved. As Roche states:

Mega-events are short-lived collective cultural actions ("ephemeral vistas"; [Greenhalgh 1998]) which nonetheless have long-lived pre and post-event social dimensions. They are publicly perceived as having an "extra-ordinary" status, among other things, by virtue of their very large scale, the time cycles in which they occur and their impacts. (2003, p. 99)

The concept of the mega-event nicely captures the nature of big spectacles such as Olympic Games and World Expos in terms of their "extra-ordinary" status, the "collective" cultural actions they induce, and the "long-lived pre and post-event social dimensions." This more contemporary theorization on these characteristics of mega-events overlaps with Dayan and Katz's conceptualization of media events, and more important, it signals the relevancy of media events in contemporary media and social environments. However, Dayan and Katz's discussion of media events spells out the role of media and the ritualistic elements in staging the spectacles for national, even international, audiences. The framework of media events provides a better understanding of how the significance and specific meanings of these mega-events are symbolically communicated, as well as of how media audiences are ritualistically oriented toward them. In this part, I will specifically analyze the ways in which the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Games is "marked off" from ordinary life and constructed as a social ritual by the media.

### **The Beijing Olympics – A Qualified Media Event**

The XXIX Olympic Games were held in Beijing, the capital city of the country with the world's largest population and fastest economic growth. China is in the midst of rapid industrialization and modernization, but it is also suffering from vast social tensions and economic inequality, not to mention the perceived threats neighboring countries and the developed world have been diligently constructing. After years of preparation, the country was ready and eager to present an image of being united, prosperous, peace-loving, and integrated into the world. The opening ceremony was the first act of a big social drama, and it closely adhered to the three sets of qualities of media events discussed earlier—the syntactic, the semantic, and the pragmatic.

The syntactic features of media events refer to interruptions of normal broadcasting routines, that these events are organized outside the media, preplanned, and presented live (Dayan & Katz, 1992, p. 10). A media event is an interruption of normal life and routine broadcasting so that it is marked off from everyday life and imbued with cultural significance. In the case of the Beijing Olympic opening ceremony, both people's daily lives and the media schedule were interrupted, but also ordered in another way around that great coming moment.

Since the moment on July 13, 2001, when China won its bid to host the 2008 Olympics, many aspects of Chinese people's daily lives had experienced interruptions, including the mass campaigns to teach English, the promotion of civilized mannerisms, and the inclusion of the Olympic preparation into many state institutions' duty-descriptions, as well as the massive construction, greening, and remodeling of major cities. The rhythms of people's daily lives were especially influenced as the opening ceremony approached. The opening ceremony was set to begin at 8:00 pm on August 8, 2008, a special time picked in accordance with the Chinese lucky number, eight. Beginning on July 20, 2008, a two-month-long traffic restriction was implemented in Beijing (Beijing 7 Yue 20 Ri, 2008). As a measure to improve air quality and reduce traffic jams during the Games, this rule put many people's daily lives into adjusted schedules and styles. On August 8, the opening ceremony day, employees of the central government, Beijing local government, state-owned enterprises, and many other institutions were given one day off (Li, 2008). The non-work Friday made the opening ceremony even more culturally different, due to the disrupted life rhythm.

Not only the physical daily life, but also the media schedule was adjusted to accommodate the opening ceremony. Seven channels of CCTV were devoted to reporting the Olympic Games. Starting on August 8, the opening ceremony day, CCTV-1, the most viewed and oldest channel of the national official broadcaster, only kept three major news programs and dedicated all the rest of the air time to Olympic coverage (Auyunhui Kaimushi, 2008).

On the other hand, the opening ceremony and its broadcasting were also carefully planned long in advance. The Beijing Olympic Broadcasting Company (BOB) was founded in May 2005, and the call for proposals for the opening ceremony began as early as July 2005, more than three years before the ceremony. Both BOB and the call for proposals were supervised by the Beijing Olympic Committee, which was independent from CCTV. Similar to other Olympic Games and opening ceremonies (Frandsen, 2003; Rothenbuhler, 1988, 1989), the Beijing Olympic opening ceremony was a preplanned and live-broadcast interruption of normal life.

In addition to the syntactic aspect of media events, the semantic refers to a media event's being presented with reverence and ceremony aiming at reconciliation, and to its being declared historic (Dayan & Katz, 1992, p. 11). Reverence toward the Beijing Olympics as a national ritual was not only shown in the live broadcast, but also through the coverage of various media outlets. First, reverence was communicated by the broadcasters during the media event. Following the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) decree, the Beijing Olympic opening ceremony included all the required ritualistic elements, such as raising the Olympic flag, playing the Olympic anthem, playing the host nation's anthem, lighting the Olympic cauldron, and athletes and judges taking the Olympic oath. As Dayan and Katz wrote, "the very flow of ceremonial events is courtly and invites awe" (*ibid.*, p. 8).

Media presentation usually doesn't interrupt the rituals mentioned above. As presented to the Chinese viewers by CCTV, there was no narrator's commentary during these rituals, but only the close-up shots of the national flag and the Olympic flag. The solemn facial expressions of the IOC officials, the Chinese officials, and the audience in the stadium were repeatedly shown during the flag-raising and anthem-playing. The reverence was captured, amplified, and presented live to hundreds of millions of viewers in China. Unlike many non-Chinese broadcasters, CCTV didn't have commercial breaks that interrupted the opening ceremony at all (Liang, 2011).

The reverence shown during the live broadcast was also suggested in the news coverage leading up to the opening ceremony. These daily presentations emphasized the importance of, and various social sectors' attention to, the great event. The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television; CCTV; the state-owned China Satellite Communication Company; the Beijing Power Grid; the local weather bureau; etc. were all reported to have geared up for the opening ceremony (3 yue 6 ri, 2008; Guangdian gebumen, 2008). On the day of the opening ceremony, the meaning of the ceremony was also explicitly articulated in the editorial of the *People's Daily*, the Chinese Communist Party's press mouthpiece. The editorial stated, "Tonight, when the five-starred red flag [China's national flag] slowly rises up in the national stadium, the grand canto of the Olympic movement will turn to a brand new page" (Tong yige shijie, 2008). All the focused presentation, the media coverage, and the official interpretation gave the Olympic Games, as well as the opening ceremony, great importance and created a reality of sincere reverence toward it.

Alongside the syntactic and semantic aspects of media events, the pragmatic is also important in defining a media event. The live-broadcast event should be able to excite large audiences, should be characterized by a norm of viewing, should give viewers reason to celebrate, should integrate societies, and should renew loyalties (Dayan & Katz, 1992, p. 12). The pragmatic was shown in numerous media reports the day after the opening ceremony. On August 9, 2008, many national news media, such as the *People's Daily* (Quanguo gezu renmin, 2008), local news media, local governments' Web portals (e.g., He, 2008; Zhang, 2008), and even websites of institutions like universities reported the organized viewing of the ceremony and enthusiastic responses from the viewers. It was reported that the live broadcast of the opening ceremony drew 840 million viewers in China. At the moment of the lighting of the cauldron, more than 90% of television sets in China were tuned in to see it (Hu & Li, 2008). The *People's Daily* reported that, "[a]s the night fell, thirty to forty thousand people gathered to the Olympic Cultural Park in Tianjin City. Many foreigners also placed themselves in the sea of joy. 'Cheero China! Cheero Beijing!' One cheer rose as another fell" (Quanguo gezu renmin, 2008). The homepage of Guangxi University for Nationalities carried a report titled "Faculty and students of all nationalities dressed up in ethnic clothing to watch Olympic opening ceremony, and shared the Olympic festive night with people nationwide" (Guo & Yang, 2008). This scene, although probably partly organized by the university, carries echoes of how Indian viewers ritualistically washed themselves, dressed up in long clothes, and covered their heads as a mark of respect to watch the live broadcast of Gandhi's funeral at home (Dayan & Katz, 1992). All these reports were trying to convey the enthusiastic response to the opening ceremony and the national pride celebrated by every Chinese. The achievement of an audience's ritual experience depends, at least in part, on the presentation of ritual features of the opening ceremony in the media coverage.

### **The Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony – A Performed Media Ritual**

The evidence above shows the live broadcast of the opening ceremony as a media event whose ritual elements contributed to social integration in a collective "time-out," yet other ritualistic elements in the opening ceremony can also be found. As Turner (1995) notes, performativity, consisting of two different layers, is also a feature of ritualistic media events. Regarding the first layer, Turner (ibid.) points out that social dramas structure people's lives in a society, basically in the same way that a religious rite of passage or change transforms the object upon which the rite is performed.

The Beijing Olympic opening ceremony is a good example of social drama rich in ritualistic performances embedded with profound meanings. First, Zhang Yimou, the world-renowned Chinese movie director, was chosen as the general director of the opening ceremony. From the very beginning, the ceremony was treated by the organizer as an artistic performance. It was neither news to "represent" a reality, nor a documentary to "record" a reality, but a performance to explicitly construct the ought-to-be reality. Furthermore, the CCTV narrators' formal, sometimes even recitative, script reading during the live broadcast of the opening ceremony was performed reverence. As Rappaport wrote, "Ritual words as well as acts can—and undoubtedly do—transmit indexical messages" (1979, p. 199). In this case, even the narrators' tones contributed to the transmission of those messages.

The second layer of performativity is elaborated by Dayan and Katz (1992). The cameras select and highlight symbolic details during media events to convey a ritualistic experience, while the audience performs in accordance with the ought-to-be behavioral norm in front of the cameras. During the live broadcast of the Beijing Olympic opening ceremony, the on-site audience's reactions were highlighted whenever possible during the cultural performance, the athletes' parade, and the raising of the national flag. The cheers of the audience were presented just like those in the live broadcast of General MacArthur's homecoming parade in Chicago in 1951 to show the enthusiasm ritualistically. However, only those actually in the parade knew that the paradegoers' enthusiasm, which peaked when the cameras were present, quickly faded out as the camera moved on with MacArthur's car (Dayan & Katz, 1992).

What's more, performances were not limited to selective representation and the audience's cooperative behaviors; they were also created by the event organizer. Before the cultural performance, hundreds of millions of television viewers worldwide saw, from the viewpoint of helicopters, fireworks forming into 29 footprints. Along the miles-long Central Axis Road in downtown Beijing, the firework footprints were seen as if walking from Yongdingmen (Gate of Permanent Stability) to the National Stadium.<sup>3</sup> Though there were real footprint fireworks fired when the video was shown, what the television viewers saw was a purely computer-generated 3D animation (Spencer, 2008a). All these details indicate that the organizer didn't even attempt to present the ceremony in a realistic way, but, from the beginning, saw it as a performance, a show, a "Spielbergian spectacle" (Tomlinson, 1996).

With all these ritual features discussed above, in what way did the opening ceremony, as a media event, exert social influence on the 840 million Chinese TV viewers? As Durkheim argues in his book *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1955), ritual contributes to people's feeling of social solidarity and helps to maintain the social status quo. By conducting rituals, symbols are imbued with sacred power. Durkheim believed that, when people performed a ritual, their "feelings of solidarity were cultivated as individuals came together and focused their attention on 'totems' that are really no more than symbols of group identity" (Quantz, 1999, p. 497). Munn further explained that "symbolic acts operate through their capacity to map changed or adjusted perceptions of the possibilities inherent in a situation onto the actor's orientation to it" (cited in Lane, 1981, p. 17).

Scholars have also specifically discussed the social influences of mediated secular rituals. Dayan and Katz (1992) argue that, with the meanings carried by the event, and more specifically with the highlighted symbols in the media presentation, citizens are socialized to the political structure of society.

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed explanation of the symbolic meanings of the foot prints and the route, see Luo (2011).

Olympic Games' opening ceremonies fit particularly well into this claim, because they are susceptible to symbolic manipulation, especially in the mass-mediated age. "These gatherings for the celebration of values, traditions, and beliefs via ritual and symbol, speech and song are identical to religious occasions in form and function, even if their appearances are distinct" (Rothenbuhler 1989, p. 140).

### **A Unique Past, an Integrated Present, and a Promising Future**

Because, as I have argued in the preceding sections, CCTV's presentation of the opening ceremony was presented and received as a media event, the meanings, imbedded in specific uses of symbols, were intentionally constructed to integrate contemporary Chinese society. Tomlinson argues that "the allegedly pure Olympic ideal has always been molded in the image of the time and place of the particular Olympiad or Games, rendering all claims to the representation or protection of some set of pure Olympic ideals unjustifiable" (1996, p. 599). Thus, he calls for critical examinations of each Olympic Games, which "would repay detailed and intensive consideration as fully-developed case-studies of event management, civic boosterism, national pride, cultural identity and media sport" (ibid., p. 586). Thus, in this section, I will examine the specific meanings communicated in the uses of symbols and performances.

In order to present its desired identity, a host country has to create opening and closing ceremonies that represent its culture with appropriate symbols that communicate certain characteristics and positive features in an accessible and appealing way (Kennet & de Moragas, 2008). In mediated rituals like media events, there are two important ways to construct the national identity: focusing on culturally meaningful symbols and infusing interpretation of the meanings. As Dayan and Katz write:

Television narrators have to make sure that the significance of such image will not pass unnoticed and will be correctly assessed. In other terms, television's interpretive function consists in making sure (1) at the image level, that the significant features of the event, its visual messages, are properly highlighted; and (2) at the narration level, that these features, once noticed, are correctly interpreted—that is, within a frame of reference consonant with that of the organizers. (1992, p. 88)

In the Beijing Olympic opening ceremony, the CCTV narrators' interpretations greatly contributed to the storytelling. They explicitly articulated the meaning of the symbols, not in arguments, but in assertions (Rappaport, 1979). The visual images "naturalized" the attention, and narrations crystallized the interpretation.

By analyzing the uses of symbols and the narrator's highlights, two themes were found dominating the welcoming ceremony and the cultural performance respectively: one about the unique history of China, and the other about China being an equal and friendly player on the world stage in contemporary times. This is hardly surprising in light of scholarly examinations of other aspects of the Beijing Olympic Games (Brownell, 2008; Chen, 2011; Close et al., 2007; deLisle, 2008; Jarvie, Hwang, & Brennan, 2008). However, during the live broadcast of the opening ceremony, it was through the media event that these cultural meanings were communicated symbolically and ritualistically.

In the first act of the cultural performance, the unique history was first presented with the well-known four great inventions: paper-making, movable type, gunpowder, and the compass. Paper-making was presented in the short film at the beginning of the welcoming ceremony. Around paper, ink, brush, inkstone, calligraphy, and painting were presented to emphasize the achievement of ancient China in



culture and the arts. The second segment of the first act of the cultural performance was named "Chinese characters." In addition to the various fonts of the Chinese character for "harmony" showing the essence of the Chinese philosophy, 897 boxes symbolized the movable type, which served as more evidence of Chinese ancient civilization. In the next parts, the splendid fireworks indicated that it was the Chinese who were the first in the world to grasp the technique of gunpowder-making, and the compass held by the actor depicting the great ancient navigator Zheng He<sup>4</sup> emphasized the contribution of ancient Chinese civilization to the whole world.

The cultural symbols were not only highlighted by the camera shots, but also by the Chinese narrators, who explicitly articulated their meanings. For example, in the welcoming ceremony, when the performers chanted the 2500-year-old quote from *Confucian Analects*, "Isn't it great to have friends coming from afar?" the female narrator added the following:

China is always well-known as an ancient civilization and the state of good etiquette to the world. For thousands of years, it has not only created a long and resplendent history and culture, but has also formed noble morality and complete etiquette.

When the movable type blocks on the stage turned into the Great Wall, the narrator said this:

At this moment, the giant movable type plate forms into the grand stance of the Great Wall. This—one of the greatest buildings in human civilization—is the essence of ancient Chinese bravery and wisdom. It symbolizes the Chinese nation's unbending back!

After the segment of the Silk Road, the narrator said:

So far, the four great inventions of ancient China, the paper-making technique, the gun powder, the movable type, and the compass, have all been presented in the performance. From the ancient time, Chinese people have been aware of condensing wisdom from working, seeking development from practices, hence they have written many grand works in the flourishing ages of the Chinese history.

Following this theme, many achievements of ancient China were emphasized and interpreted by the camera shots and narrations. Especially in the interpretations, all the ancient achievements were constantly linked to the people, told as the essence of Chinese people's wisdom. Those highlighted as the first, the oldest, and the grandest were all used to indicate the unique position that ancient China held in the world and make it clear that the Chinese national image was worthy of pride.

Other than emphasizing the unique position of China in the history, the second theme focused on China keeping up with the world's pace, and on its present and future being *as good as* the rest of the world. This theme is meant to wipe out the sentiment of the humiliating century from 1840 to 1949. After the Western industrial revolution, China had lost its advanced position in modern civilization. The need to remove the image of being oppressed and underdeveloped, and the need for public discourse demanding the revival of the Chinese nation both require symbolic support in such a public ritual.

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<sup>4</sup> Zheng He (1371–1433) was a navigator in China's Ming Dynasty. He is recognized, as argued by Gavin Menzies (2003), as the one who first discovered America and Australia decades before Columbus.

Much of the cultural performance explicitly articulated contemporary China's achievements and used many symbols to show a promising future in which China develops hand-in-hand with the rest of the world. There are three sub-themes expressing 1) contemporary China's achievement, 2) its promising future, and 3) its integration into the world.

First, contemporary China's achievements are largely presented through the grandeur of the ceremony itself. In particular, the fancy technologies used in the opening ceremony were themselves symbols of contemporary achievements (deLisle, 2008). The fous embedded with LEDs controlled to form various characters, the world's largest LED array made in the shape of a Chinese painting paper scroll, the magnificent fireworks, and the LED Olympic Rings that were lifted from the ground into the air all told the viewers that the Chinese had the capacity to host the world's most spectacular event. An astronaut was almost an inevitable symbol in the ceremony after China had successfully sent men into space and launched a spaceship to a moon orbit. The narrator also reminded the viewers that "the scenes of south and north to the Yangtze river across China shown in the paper scroll convey rich messages of the modern society, delineate the vision that Chinese people live and work in peace and contentment."

Secondly, in addition to the contemporary achievements, a promising future was mainly implied by the use of children performers. Similar to the young trees used in many rituals in the Soviet Union, children are regarded in China as a symbol of all-triumphant life and the eternal rejuvenation in new generations (Lane, 1981). From the 56 children representing 56 ethnic groups marching into the stadium to a girl singing *Ode to the Motherland*, from a five-year-old girl playing piano with a world-renowned pianist to another girl flying a kite and flying her dream, children were not simply used as performers, but also icons and indices. Rappaport, following Peirce's classifications of signs, said "icons by definition share sensible formal characteristics with that which they signify" (1979, p. 180). The image of vigorous children is used to signify the vigorous, hopeful, and flourishing current state of China in an iconic way, and well-educated, happy citizens in the future in an indexical way.

The choice of one child performer typically demonstrated the iconic use of children to construct a desired national image. It was reported and criticized by the Western media after the opening ceremony that the girl singing *Ode to the Motherland* was lip-synching the vocal track of another girl. It was reported that a senior politburo member had said the actual singer was "unsuited to the lead role because of her buck teeth" (Spencer, 2008b). In face of the criticism from the Western media, the vice president of the Beijing Olympic Organizing Committee argued that the director's job was "to achieve the most theatrical effect" ("Chinese Defend," 2008).

The change of singer, though ethically problematic according to the Western standards, showed that the organizer saw the opening ceremony and every element in it as symbols of a desirable image of China, both in the present and in the future. Here, the singing girl was chosen because her beautiful voice iconically indicated the perfection of the national image or the image of the nation's future. Meanwhile, the lip-synching girl was chosen because her good appearance was also seen as an iconic sign of the country. As Petrone described the Soviet Union's Physical Culture Day parades, "One had to be fit and attractive to be nominated by one's sports group. Only the talented and beautiful could apply" (Edelman, 2006, p. 158). Rappaport (1979) argued that, different from most circumstances in our daily life, when signifiers are insubstantial and the signified are substantial, it is possible, when using indices as signals, for the signified to be insubstantial and the signifier to be substantial. In this case, this inversion of qualities of

signifier and signified also applies. The insubstantial national image or the image of the nation's future is signified by the substantial euphonic voice and pretty appearance, what Geertz (1993) called the "model for."

The third sub-theme under "equal and friendly player in contemporary time" is "integration into the world." This sub-theme wants to assure the viewers that China is no longer a country that is underdeveloped, oppressed, or humiliated, but developed, equal with other countries, and pride-worthy. The narration in the opening ceremony repeatedly pointed out the friendship, the unity, and the development of the whole world. This theme was culminated by the theme song of the Beijing Olympics, *You and Me*, sung by the Chinese singer Liu Huan and the British singer Sarah Brightman. Both the Chinese and English parts of the lyrics repeat "you and me, from one world, we are family, put your hand in mine, meet in Beijing." It resonated with the official slogan of the Beijing Olympics, "One World, One Dream." The song was sung in both English and Chinese. Liu sang in English, and Brightman also sang in Chinese, indicating the meaning of *You and Me* not only in the lyrics, but also performatively by their ritualistic actions.

Historian Frederick Mote said, "Ignorance of China's cultural tradition and historical experience is an absolute barrier to comprehending China today" (cited in Gries, 2006, p. 489). The themes and sub-themes in the cultural performance are closely related to the "pride in the superiority of China's '5000 years of civilization'" and the memory of "a century of humiliation" from the 1840 Opium War to the founding of the Communist People's Republic of China in 1949. Compared with its great achievements in science, arts, and economy in the ancient time, the demise of the Middle Kingdom in the modern time is especially aggravating for contemporary Chinese people. The senses of both the pride and the humiliation are repeatedly infused in all kinds of narratives, such as television historic dramas, textbooks, and so on. As analyzed above, the Olympic opening ceremony is another great chance for the media to construct, or reinforce, the desired national identity, utilizing its ritual features. The live broadcast used all its repertoires to convey the cultural meanings, both implicitly and explicitly.

### Conclusion

This article began with a discussion of the relevancy of media events in today's society. In the past two decades, under the framework of media events pioneered by Dayan and Katz (1992), media's ritual elements have been examined extensively. However, with the upstaging of disruptive events in television and the routinization of disruptive news, scholars have begun to question the validity of media events in our societies.

With the analysis of a contemporary media event, the Beijing Olympic opening ceremony, it seems that the genre of media event as mediated social ritual is still used and well-received, at least in societies like China. I explicated the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic aspects of this opening ceremony, all of which qualified it as a media event under Dayan and Katz's framework. Meanwhile, the detailed reading of the carefully constructed cultural performance also provides the specific meanings communicated ritualistically through this ceremony. More important, in addition to the documentary media events analyzed by Dayan and Katz, with the contemporary media technologies, meanings were conveyed through artistic productions such as the computer graphic foot prints and lip-synching, or "cinema in real time." These spectacles do not necessarily have physical references as most old-fashioned media events

did; nonetheless, the ritualistic power is intact. Thus, I argue that the ceremonial television genre of media events is still alive.

Throughout this article, I have been concentrating on the integrative power of the constructed meanings in the opening ceremony backed by ample evidence. However, there are inevitably other and sometimes contested meanings and interpretations communicated throughout the XXIX Olympic Games. On the international stage, there were also various groups who intended to "hijack" the Beijing Olympics and define it differently (see, e.g., Dayan, 2008; deLisle, 2008; Price, 2008; Tomlinson, 1996). But most of these arguments concentrate on the multi-vocal nature of the whole Olympic Games, rather than exclusively on the heavily ritualized opening ceremony. Luo's extensive interviews (2011) did show that some non-Chinese viewers had "confusion about the subtlety of the footprint" in the opening ceremony. Western media's criticism of the computer graphics and lip-synching interpreted the intended cultural presentations as propaganda. What I am arguing in this article is for the relevancy of the genre of media event in understanding ritual communication in a contemporary social and media environment, though perhaps within a more limited boundary than two decades ago when Dayan and Katz first theorized it.

In fact, it might not be a life-or-death struggle between disruptive events and media events. Though disruptive events in television seem to be on the rise, the concept of media events is far from being obsolete. Rothenbuhler (2009) proposes seeing ceremonial television as an example of a larger paradigm of ritual communication. In this paradigm, all communication has a ritual element, "some aspect that is communication according to form that enables participation in the serious life." Routine news, as a genre of ritual communication, reproduces the sense of a stable reality. Disruptive news, as another genre of ritual communication, repairs the disrupted order and restores the social meanings. However, these genres do not run counter to or cancel out the applicability of media events as a ceremonial genre. All of them will continue to serve as ritual communication in human societies.

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