

Asserting an Ancient, Emergent Superpower: The 2009 Beijing Military Parade, Public Memory, and National Identity

JIE GONG¹
Arizona State University

On October 1, 2009, the People’s Republic of China orchestrated a grand military parade celebrating the 60th anniversary of the founding of the republic. Amid China’s ascendancy in the world, this national ceremony provides a rhetorical prototype to examine its communicative phenomena and sociopolitical circumstances. Deploying public memory as the conceptual framework to investigate this spectacle, I argue that the Chinese government mobilized a publicity campaign to project its national identity as an ancient, emergent superpower. To this end, the Chinese government exploited historico-cultural resources to consummate its communist leadership as historically continuous, politically orthodox, and ideologically legitimate. The parade’s problematic historical representation and memorial invocation, though attaining political and ideological credentials, reveal discursive dynamics and dilemmas in the increasingly contested, globalizing sphere of Chinese politics and communication.

Keywords: 2009 Beijing military parade, public memory, national identity, rhetorical criticism, China rise

On October 1, 2009, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) orchestrated a grand military parade at Beijing to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the founding of the republic. As the nation’s 14th military parade and the first one in the new century, this ceremony was intended, according to the official Xinhua News Agency (“Editorial,” 2009), to exemplify “the modernization, build-up and great success of China’s military since the country launched an opening-up drive 30 years ago” (para. 11). At a time when China’s

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Jie Gong: quentingong@gmail.com
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ascendancy on the global landscape has become an epochal geopolitical event,² no other national ritual could better mark this emergent nation's "transformation from an impoverished, war-wracked country to an economic and diplomatic power" ("China Clears," 2009, para. 5). As the "largest military parade in its history" ("Tanks, Fans," 2009, para. 2), this two-hour national performance not only showed off "a rapidly growing arsenal of sophisticated made-in-China weaponry" ("Party Like," 2009, para. 1), but evoked "China's past glories while continuing a rebranding exercise designed to show local and international audiences that the PRC is now a thoroughly modern country that can hold its own in the 21st century" (Wasserstrom, 2009, para. 2).

Although the parade as a national rendition has captured global interest from political, economic, social, and cultural perspectives, communication scholars have given little attention to this publicity event—particularly from a rhetorical standpoint to examine its symbolic dynamics and discursive operation. To address this research gap, I approach this ceremony from a public memory vantage point to explore its communicative imperative, rhetorical execution, and sociopolitical significance.

Conceptually, a public memory approach to this national ceremony is legitimated not only because national rituals have traditionally been conceptualized as a fruitful site to assess how national identity is fashioned out of historical, cultural, and symbolic resources for various functions, but also because this event intimately implicated Chinese historical heritage, political reality, and public remembrance. As sociologist Barbara Misztal (2003) points out, when memory practices have increasingly defined contemporary sociocultural formations, "studies of social memory are becoming an important part of any examination of contemporary society's main problems and tensions" (p. 8). In this sense, a history-oriented approach, especially a public memory-centered inspection of the PRC's ceremony, can be contextually enriching, conceptually illuminating, and, in historian John Bodnar's (1992) phrase, diagnostic of "the inherent contradictions of a social system" (p. 14).

Moreover, national parades, with their quintessential exhibition of a nation's historical, political, and social characteristics, have symbolically provided an effective vehicle for national identification, political recognition, and ideological promotion. This is particularly true for the PRC, whose National Day celebrations have developed into a heritage of their own, characterized by "major parades, celebrations, extravagant fireworks and, on occasion, by the display of military hardware and reviews of serried ranks of striding soldiers" (Ye & Barme, 2009, para. 1). If rituals "reveal [a society's] values at the deepest level" (Wilson, 1954, p. 240), then China's 2009 national parade, given its contemporary political, economic, and military renaissance, is unequivocally indexical of this emergent country's political realities and social circumstances, not least its self-conception and self-projection vis-à-vis domestic and global spectators' perceptions.

² China's ascendancy has become one of the most far-reaching developments in international politics in recent years. One striking piece of evidence is provided by Global Language Monitor (GLM), a media analytics company that monitors and analyzes sociocultural trends in language usage around the world. In 2009, GLM, tracked 50,000 print and electronic media over the past decade and announced that "rise of China" emerged as the decade's top search phrase, eclipsing even "the Iraq War" and "the 9/11 terrorist attack" (Dean, 2009).

For analysis, I have selected three prominent communicative artifacts from this ceremony and undertake a rhetorical reading into their historical appropriation, discursive persuasion, and sociopolitical implication. Through a rhetorical interrogation into the public memory dimension of this ceremony, I contend that the Chinese government mobilized a massive publicity campaign to project its national persona as an ancient, emergent superpower. To this end, the Chinese authorities deliberately exploited historico-cultural resources to consummate the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) leadership as historically continuous, politically orthodox, and ideologically legitimate. Such rhetorical assertions highlight the party's discursive recourse to public memory's normative potency for political unity and social control, while exposing its deep tensions and contradictions within Chinese historical traditions and sociopolitical realities. Inevitably, such problematic historical representation and memorial invocation, though attaining political and ideological credentials to some extent, reveal the discursive dynamics and dilemmas in the increasingly contested, globalizing sphere of Chinese politics and communication.

Rhetorical Criticism, Public Memory, and National Identity

Communication scholars have been aware of memory's vital function in human communication since ancient Greece. Long conceived as "a system of mnemonic devices based on visualization of what was to be said" (Kennedy, 1998, p. 9), such an instrumental notion has been constantly enriched through multidisciplinary research, especially by sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992), who expanded memory study from Henry Bergson's individualistic confines to a collective/social level. With the emergence of modern nation-states in the 19th century and the drastic—and often traumatic—impacts of interethnic and international conflicts during the 20th century, communication scholars, alongside their colleagues across a multitude of disciplines, have been increasingly drawn to memory's public dimension and national implication.

As Kendall Phillips (2004) writes, "societies are both constituted by their memories and, in their daily interactions, rituals, and exchanges, constitute these memories." He thus argues, "in a very real sense, to speak of memory in this way is to speak of a highly rhetorical process" (p. 2). In reconceptualizing memory's social texture and rhetorical potency, public memory has been characterized by its grounding in consensuality and consubstantiality, as "an intersubjective and interactive phenomenon (memory as something that exists among a group of people)" (Jasinski, 2001, p. 356); its historicity and particularity, as "a shared sense of the past, fashioned from the symbolic resources of community and subject to its particular history, hierarchies, and aspirations" (Browne, 1995, p. 248); and its collectivity and indeterminacy, as "recollections of the past that are determined and shaped by the group . . . [and] thereby presumes activities of sharing, discussion, negotiation, and, often, contestation" (Zelizer, 1995, p. 214). Such productive conceptualizations thus supply a solid foundation to inform rhetorical investigation and social analysis of public memory as "an overtly politically and emotionally invested phenomena" (Blair, 2006, p. 53).

Thereby, I deploy public memory as the theoretical framework to rhetorically unravel the PRC's 2009 military parade and explicate how public remembrances surrounding this event "attain meaning, compel others to accept them, and are themselves contested, subverted, and supplanted by other memories" (Phillips, 2004, p. 3). Unlike the distinct, antecedent relationships between theory and method

in social sciences, theory and method in rhetorical inquiry are inherently holistic, in which theory helps the critic "develop[s] a sensitivity to certain kinds of utterances which one can then look for in public discourse" (Brummett, 1984, p. 100). By richly sensitizing people to their rhetorical milieus and discursive formations, rhetorical theory and criticism, in Brummett's (1984) phrase, are intimately "heuristic," "pedagogic," and "moral" (p. 103). To such ends, a rhetorical intersection with public memory provides a number of conceptual dialectics and analytical guidelines over national commemorations constituted by historical representation, political configuration, and social intervention.

First, a rhetorical examination of public memory highlights its normative function as sociopolitical orthodoxy. As "an ideological system" (Browne, 1995, p. 243), public memory functions as "a model for society [that] defines its experience, articulates its values and goals, and provides cognitive, affective, and moral orientation for realizing them" (Schwartz, 1996, p. 910). If "all symbolism harbors the curse of mediacy" (Cassirer, 1946, p. 7), then public memory, fashioned from a society's cultural and symbolic resources, can hardly resonate with its subscribers without invoking primitive appeals of orientation and exemplarity. Thus, public memory often "takes the form of an ideological system with special language, beliefs, symbols, and stories" (Bodnar, 1992, p. 4), or it assumes the "monumental history . . . always in danger of being a little altered and touched up and brought nearer to fiction" (Nietzsche, 1957, p. 15). Either reduced to idealist abstraction or corrupted into psychological mystery, public memory's ideological property tends to "privilege some meanings over others and functions to exclude and forget as much as it includes and remembers" (Mandziuk, 2003, p. 289). As such, public memory deeply implicates different forms of forgetting, especially repressive erasure, which "can be employed to deny the fact of a historical rupture as well as to bring a historical break" (Connerton, 2008, p. 60). As a result, public memory's prescriptive function not only renders itself amenable to political control and ideological exploitation but also underscores historical reconstruction as a crucial locus for rhetorical inspection and sociopolitical critique.

Second, a persuasive interrogation of public memory reveals its reflective/semiotic system of sociopolitical realities. As such, public memory operates as "a symbolic structure in which the reality of the community's inner life could be rendered more explicit and more comprehensible than it would have been otherwise" (Schwartz, Zerubavel, Barnett, & Steiner, 1986, p. 160). Sociologist Barry Schwartz (1996) specifies this function as "a model of society" that embodies "its needs, problems, fears, mentality, and aspirations" (p. 910). Normally the past remains dormant unless some current issue disrupts politico-societal equilibrium and entails necessary overhaul or reversal. Hence, public memory, when concurrently conceived by the authorities from a presentist/partisan orientation and by the public from an affective/vernacular standpoint, discloses how available historical resources and symbolic forms are competitively marshaled toward producing diverging representations of historical experiences resonant with their respective followers. As "part of culture's meaning-making apparatus," collective recollection "establishes an image of the world so compelling as to render meaningful its deepest perplexities" (Schwartz, 2000, p. 17). Thus, public memory, "as a cognitive device to mediate competing interpretations and privilege some explanations over others" (Bodnar, 1992, p. 15), is symbolically intertwined and politically indexical of political landscape and social reality.

Last, a rhetorical study of public memory provides a revelatory indicator of a nation's relationship to its past and, by extension, its current national identity. A nation, in Ernest Renan's (2006) view, "is a soul" that comprises two components: "One is the shared possession of a rich heritage of memories; the other is present-day consent, wanting to live together, the will to continue to cherish the entire inheritance one has received" (p. 165). Therefore, collective remembrance, as "a highly contested and negotiated process . . . driven by the need to create a usable past" (Wertsch, 2002, p. 40), intimately reflects our committed (dis)beliefs in past experiences and shared identity, often with emotional intensity. Hence, a look into its mnemonic evocations discloses a nation's historical foundation, political undercurrents, and social circumstances. When a nation reverts to its past for symbolic resources and persuasive purposes, such collective remembering produces, in Browne's (1995) view, not only particular versions of national identity but also "debates over the ownership of memory—its regulation, placement, and assignment of meaning" (p. 243). Bodnar (1992) thus notes, in collective recollection, "each site and each bit of detail offered for public consumption inevitably became a representation of a larger and more complex reality and concept" (p. 177). Consequently, public memory "involves not so much specific economic or moral problems, but rather fundamental issues about the entire existence of a society: its organization, structure of power, and the very meaning of its past and present" (Bodnar, 1992, p. 14).

In short, as a conceptual approach, public memory investigations produce an "especially rich reservoir of data, with their high degree of articulation of different framing principles making for analytically easy access" (Irwin-Zarecka, 2007, p. 67). Thus, this type of investigation lends itself to critically illuminating interconnection and interaction between collective remembrance and national identity. Given that current rhetorical scholarship remains "surprisingly limited" on the discursive process of national identity (Bruner, 2000, p. 87), such analytical potencies are especially valuable to exploring how public memory operates as "a projection on the part of the collective that wishes to remember and of the individual who remembers in order to belong" (Assmann, 2006, p. 7). If rhetorical inquiry can "help formulate a critical practice for 'diagnosing' collective identities through the analysis of competing discourses/texts that create, sustain and/or transform them" (Bruner, 2005, p. 312), then a rhetorical scrutiny into the public memory dimension of national identity is particularly suitable to unpacking the important (dis)junctures between historical representation, national identity, and sociopolitical reality. This is especially true because memory discourse, as "one of the most powerful modern narrative forms" (Hasian & Carlson, 2000, p. 60), has become increasingly prominent at a crucial time when "there are global transformations in national and international arrangements that will undoubtedly have a profound impact on the configuration of the future world community" (Bruner, 2000, p. 87).

Indeed, as "one of the most important symbolic resources we have" (Irwin-Zarecka, 2007, p. 67), public memory, alongside national identity, have become "not things we think about, but things we think with" (Gillis, 1996, p. 5) in our social relations and national lives. In this sense, a rhetorical engagement contributes to "a kind of critical self-consciousness about the symbolic and political character of public memory" (Browne, 1995, p. 237), offering "a conceptual framework for critiquing articulations of national identity" (Bruner, 2000, p. 87). This is especially relevant for a past-oriented country like China and its people as "*Homo Historiens* in every sense" (Huang, 2007, p. 180) shaped by the nation's millennial, vicissitudinous history. More importantly, its rhetorical trajectory has not deviated far from its

dynastic cycle of discursive pattern, where "it is in history that the state legitimates itself; and circularly, it is in the state that history and heaven's order are revealed" (Kluver, 1996, p. 29).

The Rhetorical Situation of the 2009 Beijing Military Parade

China traditionally celebrates National Day with a military parade every decade, and the 2009 rendition had specific contextual imperatives and communicative dynamics. With the participation of more than 200,000 military personnel and mass performers, this "perfectly executed and magnificently staged spectacle" (Chang, 2010, para. 1) showcased China's "impressive accomplishments in gaining economic, military, and political power over the past 30 years" (Pei, 2009b, para. 1). As Michael Wines and Sharon Lafranier (2009) of *The New York Times* note, if "the last such parade, in 1999, was of interest mainly to foreign military analysts and China hands . . . [then] this time, the world's news outlets reported raptly on the significance of every detail" (para. 3). In fact, for the first time, China's premier official TV broadcaster, China Central Television (CCTV), catapulted this national ceremony to the global limelight by providing live multilanguage coverage over the Internet to worldwide audiences.

In light of its national significance and international attention, the *Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Daily* ("Pay Tribute," 2009) designated this parade as "an important, honorable political task," as it "fully demonstrates the CCP's political capabilities and the PRC's national strength; comprehensively reviews great achievements in the PLA's modernization; and forcefully enhances national spirit and patriotic sentiment" (para. 3). Obviously, in outlining its rhetorical aspirations for this ceremony, the Chinese authorities targeted a number of domestic and international exigencies.

Domestically, the Chinese government eagerly underlined its political, ideological, and social stability at a memorial moment when China would mark the ruling CCP's 90th birthday the next year (1921–2011). Moreover, China's 30-year reform and opening up had dramatically transformed—but also drastically fragmented—the country with political fossilization, economic liberalization, and social polarization. Thus, the Chinese authorities needed to reenlist national consensus to unify political constituencies and social unity while accentuating their political legitimacy and ideological relevance. Externally, China's robust developments since the late 1970s had engendered both optimism and concern, including rising misgivings over China's political, economic, and military ambitions. Further, China's political uncertainty, ideological rigidity, and economic expansion had prompted the world to question its politico-ideological sustainability and socioeconomic prospects. Given all these factors, the Chinese government felt obligated to reassure the international community with a renewed national image of cooperation and convergence. Consequently, Chinese leaders needed this national ceremony to highlight the CCP's partisan centrality, ideological vibrancy, and social dynamism while conveying a politically confident and globally collaborative persona to convince the world of its peaceful ascendancy and international integration.

Under such compounded circumstances, the Chinese government in many ways reached a critical juncture to craft "an image of strength to both the Chinese public and the international community" (Pei, 2009a, para. 4). It is precisely due to such political stakes and intense publicity that this ceremony offers a fruitful site to examine how the CCP government appropriated Chinese historical heritage, public

remembrance, and national identity toward its sociopolitical objectives, and how its rhetorical projections were alternatively perceived by Chinese and global publics.

The 2009 Beijing Military Parade

I have selected three prominent episodes of this ceremonial parade as the focal communicative texts for a close reading of their symbolic dynamics, rhetorical operation, and sociopolitical ramification. The first artifact is *Tiananmen Square*, which, as China's sociopolitical epicenter in modern and contemporary times, served as the background for historical evocation and memorial mobilization throughout this ceremony. I chose this contextual artifact because amid "the fragmentation of contemporary culture," rhetorical discourse "ceases to be what it is whenever parts of it are taken 'out of context'" (McGee, 1990, p. 283) and calls for an expanded, contingent sense of rhetorical textuality. Second, I selected *President Hu's keynote speech*, which, as the textual signification of the ceremony's theme, functioned as a pivotal framing device of this important occasion and a revelatory disclosure of the CCP's self-presentation. Third, I chose to examine the *display of the CCP supreme leaders' portraits*, which, as a mediated representation of the CCP's successive leaderships, contained crucial clues to unpacking the CCP's historical negotiation and institutional narrative. All together, these three rhetorical texts exerted far-reaching influence on China's (inter)national image and public perception, as illustrated by subsequent analyses into each artifact's discursive execution and sociopolitical implication.

Tiananmen Square

Under the gaze of the CCP politburo members atop the Tiananmen Rostrum, a column of ceremonial soldiers marched 169 steps from the Monument to Chinese People's Heroes toward the northern flagstaff to hoist the national flag. The 169 steps, according to Chinese official commentary, historically represented "China's modern vicissitudes, traversing from its dynastic decline under Western colonial powers since 1840 to its contemporary rejuvenation under the CCP's leadership" (August First Film Studio, 2009).³

As the staging ground and backdrop for this ceremony, Tiananmen Square was constructed in the early 15th century to symbolize the emperors' supreme majesty and absolute monarchy during China's last feudal dynasties.⁴ Because of its quintessential symbolism, this public place has henceforth become China's central locus of political conflicts and social movements. Since the PRC's founding in 1949, the Square has been not only geographically expanded and artistically landscaped to become the largest public square in the world but politically textured and ideologically invested by witnessing many political melodramas and social tumult (see Figure 1).

³ The August First Film Studio is named after the PLA's founding date—August 1, 1927. Its operation falls under the jurisdiction of the PLA General Political Department, thus representing official view of the Chinese government and the PLA.

⁴ China's last two feudal dynasties were the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 A.D.), which relocated its capital to Beijing, and the Qing Dynasty (1636–1911 A.D.), which witnessed the downfall of China's feudal monarchy.



Figure 1. Tiananmen Rostrum. Source: China News Service.

Within such historical sediments and sociopolitical figurations, the 2009 military parade's opening scene, which blended "elements of the regimented festival with the pomp and hierarchical practices that resonated with certain kinds of imperial and republican-era grandeur" (Ye & Barme, 2009, para. 4), evidently reflected the Chinese government's recourse to public memory's normative function as "an ideological model": On this nationally memorial day, the Square subtly imposed an interpretive grid to shape the public's symbolic perceptions of this event within Tiananmen Square's sociohistorical legacies. Specifically, first, the Monument to Chinese People's Heroes symbolizes the sacrifices of numerous revolutionary martyrs who laid down their lives for the New China, thus providing a deliberate cue to the CCP's revolutionary lineage and politico-ideological credentials. The latter two are precisely what the Chinese government urgently needed to reconsolidate its increasingly amorphous legitimacy and outdated

ideology among domestic and global audiences. Second, when the Tiananmen Rostrum was deployed as the podium where Chinese leaders inspected the ceremony, such a ceremonial arrangement telegraphed a nuanced aura of historical continuity and political centrality for the CCP leadership, as this structure intimately prompted Chinese recollections of the once-prosperous heyday during the feudal dynasties. Last, just as the erstwhile emperors regularly staged imperial rituals for royal coronations, national exams, and criminal trials, the Square's dynastic iconicity discursively operates as an interpellating device to juxtapose the relationship between the communist leaders and the people with that of the feudal sovereigns and common subjects. As such, the Chinese authorities memorially refashioned and ideologically appropriated Tiananmen Square as a rhetorical platform to contextualize and legitimate the CCP's historical inevitability and political orthodoxy. As Alan Kluver (1996) says of Chinese political discourse, when political authority is repackaged in the semblance of historical tradition, "the social construction of those relationships is veiled, thus making it more difficult to contradict the power relationships as manifested" (p. 22).

However, such exploitive appropriation also dialectically evokes public memory's countervailing function as "a model of society," which renders China's "deepest perplexities"—particularly the CCP's rhetorical motives—more meaningful and comprehensible. Under close examination informed by public memory's revelatory scheme, an array of the Chinese government's rhetorical tactics becomes immediately apparent.

Among other things, the employment of Tiananmen Square as the rhetorical rendezvous to underwrite the CCP's revolutionary cachet and political legitimacy is historically problematic. True, given its sociopolitical symbolism, the Square can be an ideal choice to deploy the PRC's national persona before the world, yet its memorial ploy, though understated in many ways, revealed the deep contradictions in China's public memory evocations on historical and political levels.

Historically, the Gate of Heavenly Peace, initially called *Chengtianmen* (the gate to receive the divine order), was where Chinese supreme rulers were entrusted by heaven with *Tian Ming* (天命, the mandate of heaven) to oversee human affairs. For the Chinese, *Tian Ming* has been "the most popular and effective persuasive appeals" (Lu, 1998, p. 6) and remains "the legitimating force in Chinese politics" (Kluver, 1996, p. 31). Such mythical attribution of its celestial legitimacy runs counter to the CCP's self-styled secular identity as the vanguard of proletarian workers and underclass peasants, revealing the PRC's pursuit of a "monumental history" approach by resorting to "false analogy" (Nietzsche, 1957, p. 16) or a repressive erasure that "[denies] the fact of a historical rupture" (Connerton, 2008, p. 60). As a result, by discursively co-opting this dynastically emblematic architecture and its underlying imperial hierarchy, this ceremony seemed more reminiscent of "the era when the Qing Emperor would sit perched atop his throne at the gates of the Forbidden City, surveying his massed army before him" (Tharoor, 2009, para. 8). Moreover, Li Datong (2009), a Chinese journalism scholar, observes that the Chinese authorities seem unaware of the anachronism of such imperial ceremonies, and, worse still, such dramas are identical in the core and expression with those of the Soviet Union in the mass hail of absolute loyalty and total obedience to the leader.

Politically, the CCP since its inception has promoted itself as a revolutionary force to replace decadent feudalism. Yet the continually expanded Tiananmen Square even eclipses Moscow's Red Square, arguably providing an even grander place to promote Chinese feudal tradition and the CCP's partisan deity. Not surprisingly, at such a historico-culturally conflicted site, this "surprisingly old-fashioned" parade, rather than memorially inspiring a forward-looking vision, appeared more analogous to "the diktats of Prussian tacticians" (Tharoor, 2009), "the China of the fifties," and "North Korea's mass games" (Branigan & Watts, 2009). Zhi Xiaomin (2008), a Chinese cultural scholar, observes on *Yanhuangchunqiu* (an influential Chinese historical journal) that the traditional arrangement of the CCP leaders inspecting from above the military and the people implies a hierarchical relationship that has become deeply inconsonant with contemporary Chinese realities and modern democratic tenets.

As a result, the Chinese government's deployment of Tiananmen Square as the symbolic context, with its inherent historical inconsistencies and sociopolitical contradictions, revealed this party state's discursive reductionism and political expediency in intervening in national history and public remembrance.

President Hu's Keynote Speech

Standing in the open sunroof of a Chinese-made Red Flag limousine, President Hu Jintao reviewed the PLA lined along Chang'an Boulevard. He then returned to the Tiananmen Rostrum and delivered a keynote speech to mark this national occasion.⁵ Scrutinized from a public memory perspective, Hu's rhetorical rendition, evocative of "memories of the cold war and the former Soviet Union's performances at May Day ceremonies" (Wines & Lafranier, 2009, para. 12), disclosed several notably memorial themes (see Figure 2).

⁵ Hu's speech can be accessed at http://corner.youth.cn/popular/200910/t20091012_1046812.htm.



Figure 2. President Hu delivers the keynote speech. Source: Xinhua.

Hu commenced by defining this historic occasion as “a cheerful and solemn moment,” at which “people from all over the country’s ethnic groups are extremely proud of our great nation’s development and progress and are confident of the Chinese nation’s bright prospect on the road to revival.” For a national commemoration, such a sentiment-tuning ploy was felicitous, but Hu’s subsequent narration proved that this significant holiday, in his conception, was less a national celebration than a publicity opportunity for partisan self-attribution of political credit and ideological superiority. As Hu identified himself as speaking “on behalf of the CCP, China’s National Congress, the Central Government, and the CCP Military Commission,” he explicitly designated the parade as the party’s celebratory carnival. As such, he “pay[s] tribute to all the revolutionary pioneers of older generations and martyrs who made great contributions to realizing national independence and liberation of the people, the country’s prosperity and strength and happy life of the people.” By this gambit, Hu clearly hinted to domestic and global spectators that this parade was first and foremost installed as an achievement milestone to the CCP’s leadership over six decades and its self-referential confirmation as the PRC’s benefactor.

To secure the CCP’s historical status within the Chinese national trajectory, Hu continued to fine-tune his argument by situating this occasion within a broad chronological canvas. “Sixty years ago on this

day," he recalled, "the Chinese people achieved great victory of the Chinese revolution after more than one hundred years of blooded struggle." Here, Hu subtly extended the PRC's founding beyond its contemporary horizon (1949–2009) by superimposing it on the modern Chinese context (1840– 2009) and further across the whole national existence, as he added, "At that moment [October 1, 1949], the Chinese people stood up and the Chinese nation with over 5,000 years of civilization began a new page of development and progress in history." Such historic turnaround, Hu's attributional disposition reminded the audience, were inconceivable if not for the great helmsmanship of "the three generations of the CCP leadership with Mao Tse-tung, Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin as the core."

With such a perspectival configuration on the one hand, Hu recognized—but implicitly relegated—the transformative initiative of the Chinese people, except acknowledging that the latter "have joined hands to overcome the great hardship and made great contributions that have been recognized by the world." On the other hand, Hu purposefully collapsed China's millennial history and deliberately condensed its multifaceted revolutionary endeavors into a singular political vision, recasting all modern Chinese political struggles into a linear ideological movement exclusively under the CCP's stewardship. Obviously, Hu mythologized the CCP's legitimacy by resorting to a vital part of public memory—national myth—as an explanatory master narrative to "deal with contradictions in experience, to explain the apparently inexplicable, and to justify the inevitable" (Turner, 1993, p. 72). If "the contents of myth," Paul Connerton (1989) writes, "are represented as being not subject to any kind of change" (p. 42), then Chinese national myths serve as a "retelling of history in order to depict the origins and development of a nation . . . in a way that coincides with the self-image of its founders and leaders" (Starr, 1973, pp. 34–35). Invoked as such, Nietzsche (1957) may suggest, it is hardly possible to distinguish "between a 'monumental' past and a mythical romance, as the same motives for action can be gathered from the one world as the other" (p. 15). Hu's speech, typical of such a mythic genre, "provides a national and social identity for a nation and its people, thereby establishing the transcendence necessary for legitimation" (Kluver, 1996, p. 18).

In subsequently assessing this ceremony's significance, Hu emphasizes his politico-ideological essentialism, underlining that "today's modern, open China stands as a testament to a corollary that only socialism, reform, and opening-up can save and push forward China." In a didactic tone, Hu enjoined that it is through the historical transformation and political achievement that "Chinese people eventually have the confidence and resources to build their country and make due contributions to the world." Evidently, Hu predicated China's national building on the CCP's politico-ideological leadership, to which China's national renaissance and public welfare must be unconditionally subordinate.

Toward the conclusion, Hu reinforced his politico-ideological thesis by reeling off the CCP's characteristically high-flown, all-inclusive policy objectives:

- We will unswervingly follow our path on socialism with Chinese characteristics and comprehensively implement the ruling party's basic theory, basic plan, basic program, and basic experience.

- We will stick to the policy of “peaceful reunification” and “one country, two systems” to help Hong Kong and Macao remain prosperous and stable, and to work for the complete reunification of the motherland, which is the common aspiration of the Chinese nation.
- We will follow a path of peaceful development. We join hands with people from all over the world in pushing forward the lofty cause of making the world more peaceful and progressive and building a harmonious world of long-lasting peace and prosperity.

Again, Hu’s policy delineation, “speckled with boilerplate references to Chinese-style socialism” (Wines & Lafraniere, 2009, para. 7) and eschatological superfluities, implicitly extrapolated from the PRC’s short trajectory a seemingly scintillating yet factually uncertain prospect for the nation’s future. Rhetorically, he adroitly capitalized on the normative function of public memory to consolidate the Chinese public’s consensus on the PRC’s status quo, enhance its sense of national pride, and, most critical of all, centralize its support for the CCP’s leadership. Ironically, when rationalizing the CCP’s anachronistic politico-ideological system and ultra-capitalist sociocultural excesses, Hu’s vehement sloganeering betrayed that, after its 60-year absolutist rule, the CCP remains deeply besieged by—if not completely defaulted on—its national visions promised 60 years ago. Among other issues, the CCP has yet to define its apparently almighty yet infinitely fluid ideological mantras (e.g., “socialism with Chinese characteristics”); it has yet to achieve national reunification with Taiwan, while the latter since 1949 “has been separate from mainland China and shows no sign of heeding Beijing’s calls for reunification as it pursues its democratisation” (Fenby, 2009, para. 3); and it has yet to convince its Asian neighbors and the world that its ascendancy heralds a peaceful partner and responsible stakeholder, not a regional hegemon and global juggernaut.

Interestingly, for all the self-assuring confidence and messianic condescension pervasive throughout Hu’s address, its inherent sociopolitical discrepancies vis-à-vis China’s sociopolitical realities become all the more conspicuous. Most revealing of all, Premier Wen Jiabao openly admitted that the CCP government had yet to let its people “lead a happier, more decent life” (Wen, 2010, para. 5). His remarks have since become unusually resonant among the Chinese public, demonstrating that the CCP has a long way to go in measuring up to people’s basic expectations. If China’s internal contradictions can hardly be camouflaged by Hu’s rhetorical heroics and historical revision, then the external perceptions are no less penetrating. As Wines and Lafraniere (2009) of *The New York Times* note, despite Hu’s claim that a strong China “stood rock-firm in the east of the world” (para. 3), the whole parade was tightly blanketed by unprecedented security measures around Beijing. Minxin Pei (2009c), a Chinese political scholar, warns that, “The party’s suppression of historical memory carries a huge cost [because] Beijing cannot expect to gain genuine international respect unless its leaders confront history and achieve political reconciliation with their people” (para. 6).

In short, despite Hu’s memorially inflected rhetoric directed at national branding and partisan aggrandizement, its underlying incongruities vis-à-vis China’s domestic and international circumstances were far from reassuring indexes of the PRC’s political stability, ideological sustainability, and social credibility as an ancient, emergent power.

The Display of the CCP Supreme Leaders' Portraits

Following the one-hour parade of the PLA services and arms, a mass pageant followed with 36 formations of performers "in elaborate costumes moving in exact unison, reminiscent of the Olympic opening ceremony last year" (BBC, 2009a, para. 11). Among dozens of thematic floats highlighting China's achievements in political, economic, social, and cultural fields, most prominent were the sections featuring the portraits of the CCP's paramount leaders—Mao Tse-tung, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao. At a time when China is ascending in the global limelight, how the Chinese government represented its leadership transition and institutional history poses a significant entry point to probe its discursive dynamics and rhetorical focus (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. The CCP leader portrait display. Source: Xinhua.

In chronological order, the first portrait of Mao Tse-tung was surrounded by a celebratory formation of college students chanting "long live the Mao Tse-tung thought!" and "the Chinese people have stood up!" (Mao's classic proclamation at the PRC's founding). CCTV commented that Mao's thought proved a creative application and extension of Marxism in China, steering the Chinese people toward a brand-new era of national development. The second portrait, of Deng Xiaoping, highlighted his contributions to China's reform and opening up since the late 1970s. CCTV annotated that Deng's

leadership succeeded in emancipating people's mind-set, seeking truth from the facts and embracing a new historical period in national reconstruction. The third portrait was of Jiang Zemin, who, as Deng's appointed successor, mostly inherited Deng's policies. CCTV stressed that Jiang's theory helped the CCP lead the Chinese people to achieve new breakthroughs in developing the country into a prosperous society. The last protagonist of the portrait display, Hu Jintao, also was designated by Deng to succeed Jiang, primarily regurgitated his predecessors' programs, except he advocated a few flimsy slogans (e.g., "build a harmonious society" and "cultivate a new outlook on scientific development"), which CCTV nevertheless credited with contributing to the country's continuous advances.

Apparently, this punctiliously mediated representation of the CCP leaders intended to emplot a historically progressive storyline of the CCP leadership evolution, injecting an official version of its political legitimacy and ideological continuity. Its overall discursive efficacy, magnified by a sweeping display of national celebration and mass loyalty, are indeed memorially impressive. Yet in light of the PRC's tortuous, eventful course over 60 years, this rhetorical spectacle of personality cult is historically problematic and sociopolitically controversial.

Historically, when thousands of college students chant "Long Live the Mao Tse-tung Thought!" such a prostrate sloganeering style readily invokes the Chinese historical remembrances that such address was once used only for two occasions: First, it was exclusively reserved for celebrating feudal emperors to wish them permanent monarchy and infinite longevity; and, second, it was zealously hailed by the masses to salute Mao's immortality during the radical Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Here, the prominence of Mao's portrait intimately engaged the Chinese's memorial nerves with two rhetorical effects: It confirmed Mao's deity along Chinese feudal political traditions and it appropriated Mao's mythic image to vindicate the subsequent leadership, because "Mao's reputation and legacy not only established his own legitimacy, but the legitimacy of the Party in large part rested on him" (Kliver, 1996, p. 25). Chinese scholar Li Datong (2009) laments, "After 60 years of the PRC's founding, it's inscrutably idiotic and inopportune that the CCP still puts Mao on a pedestal as the source of legitimacy and orthodoxy" (para. 3).

Sociopolitically, although this portrait exhibition presented a normative narrative of the CCP's institutional continuity, the actual historical process had "not exactly been an uninterrupted period of economic growth and political stability" (Pei, 2009c, para. 1). The portrait montage purposefully masks the political differences and interpersonal conflicts between Mao, Deng, Jiang, and Hu. For example, during Mao's tenure, when "social engineering continually convulsed China in unrelenting political campaigns" (Shambaugh, 2009, para. 3), Deng suffered repeated political persecution for his moderate position. It was not until Mao's death that Deng managed to pull the country back from being "traumatized, tired and alienated by 30 years of Maoist experiments and totalitarian controls" (Shambaugh, 2009, para. 3). Here, the Chinese government's "monumental" rhetorical strokes tend to, in Nietzsche's (1957) view, "bring together things that are incompatible and generalizing them into compatibility . . . [and] weaken the differences of motive and occasion" (p. 15). Chinese economist He Qinglian (2009) notes that

the logical irony behind the PRC's six-decade achievements lies in that it spent the first 30 years to demolish the bourgeois class as its "revolutionary accomplishments," while it

took the second half to reinstate the class differences as its “progressive attainments.” (para. 5)

Chinese political scholar Zhang Ming points out that such an arbitrary, seemingly seamless concatenation of leader portraits in fact discloses “a confusing hodgepodge and a contrary impression of the CCP’s historical retrogression” (quoted in Zhou, 2009, para. 2).

Accordingly, rather than eulogizing the CCP’s partisan unity and organizational cohesion, this personality parade of willful juxtaposition and memorial revisionism exposed the CCP’s rhetorical endeavor to prescribe “a single, committed perspective” (Novick, 1999, p. 4) on public remembrance to obscure its internecine institutional conflict and tumultuous sociopolitical administration. It is due to such discursive oversimplification and historical perversion that this portrait exhibition ends up being not so much a credible image of its institutional maturity and programmatic continuity as a cacophonous reminder of the CCP leadership’s unpredictability and political opacity.

Conclusion

Chinese and global media responses to this national parade, were effusive and wide ranging. The Chinese official *People’s Daily* (“Editorial,” 2009) editorialized that the historic ceremony “marks a China with substantially increased economic power and global prestige, as well as a new starting point to achieve even greater strides in national rejuvenation under the CCP leadership” (para. 4). Ishaan Tharoor (2009) of *Time* magazine wrote, “If last year’s Olympics were China’s flashy coming-out party, the massive military parade commemorating 60 years of communist rule on Oct. 1 marks a more serious side to the rise of the People’s Republic” (para. 1). Enumerating a series of graphic comparisons of China’s “facts and figures” across the six decades, the BBC (2009b) commended that “China has been transformed from a backward peasant society into the greatest manufacturing economy in human history” (para. 1). David Shambaugh (2009), a noted scholar on Chinese politics, observed that China’s “hybrid model of quasi-state capitalism and semi-democratic authoritarianism—sometimes dubbed the ‘Beijing Consensus’—has attracted attention across the developing world” (para. 4).

However, if “it is through the National Day celebrations over the past 60 years that one can gauge the unsteady biorhythms of the nation-state” (Ye & Barne, 2009, para. 1), then a critical interrogation into the PRC’s discursive refraction of public memory is productive toward unpacking its historical appropriation, sociopolitical representation, and national identity construction. As shown from the foregoing analyses, while pursuing political recognition and public identification via this “immense, powerful and flawless” ceremony (Wines & Lafranier, 2009, para. 2), what the Chinese authorities staged via this “spectacular display of nationalistic pride” (Pei, 2009b, para. 1) illuminates our understanding of public memory in current Chinese sociopolitical circumstances and communicative phenomena.

First, the Chinese government substitutes public memory’s normative potency (“a model for society”) for its semiotic function (“a model of society”). This is particularly true in the Chinese authorities’ “evinced ‘short-sightedness’ toward its past” (Moisi, 2009a, para. 6): reducing modern China’s multifaceted struggles into a singular movement under the CCP’s tutelage; smoothing the CCP’s

ideological turnarounds and political vagaries into a coherent account of doctrinal constancy and policy continuity; and shifting the audience's attention from deep sociopolitical contradictions to superficial ceremonial festivities. Such memorial inflection, in Nietzsche's (1957) terms, "turns aside, as far as it may, from reasons" in order to "depict effects at the expense of the causes—'monumentally'" (p. 15). As a result, behind the PRC's commemorative projection of an ancient, emergent superpower at Tiananmen Square (which literally means the Square of Heavenly Peace Gate), the inherent irony can hardly be more apparent: Beijing's security level during this ceremony was even tighter than during the 2008 Olympic Games, with more than 1 million volunteers mobilized to guard against public disorder. Barbara Demick (2009) of the *Los Angeles Times* reflects, "Beijing feels more like a city under martial law than the dynamic capital that wowed the world during the 2008 Summer Olympics" (para. 2). To most Western spectators," Melinda Liu (2009) of *Newsweek* writes, "the parade's goose-stepping soldiers and unprecedented display of military hardware will undoubtedly look like muscle-flexing triumphalism. . . . Yet the regime's underlying mood is not aggression; it's insecurity" (para. 2). Minxin Pei (2009b) points out that, although "China's grandiose military production may succeed in temporarily boosting national pride, in the long term, it will be little more than a passing distraction from the intractable problems confronting the regime" (para. 1). Subtitled "Today's Celebrations Ignore History and the Party's Uncertain Future," *The Wall Street Journal* ("Communist China," 2009) editorializes, "The Communist Party will march in isolation, in a show of strength but not confidence, divorced from the people it governs" (para. 1). China's phenomenal advances "are undeniable and deserving of respect," Dominique Moisi (2009a), Harvard political professor, diagnoses, "but the success of a country that has so mobilized its energies as to transform past humiliations into massive national pride is not accompanied—and this is an understatement—by a responsible opening into its past" (para. 7).

Second, amid the PRC's discursive projection of an upcoming superpower, its communist government remains politico-ideologically unsettled—rather than sociohistorically grounded—in its relationships with the nation's past. Throughout the parade, the ceremony was consistently evocative of and closely predicated on China's feudal heritage and dynastic tradition. Ironically enough, the CCP, as a self-labeled new-type proletarian party, exposed an extensive range of underlying contradictions in its memorial discourse on national identity, which reveals that, despite its 60-year administration, the CCP's partisan legitimacy seems more historically regressive than socially progressive. Such an inherently conservative nature not only belies the party's ostensibly revolutionary mission but discloses one of the Chinese government's foundational vulnerabilities as an ascendant power: If the period of 60 years chronologically marks a person's full maturity in Chinese culture, then this national ceremony demonstrated that the communist leadership had yet to outgrow its discursive obsession of pursuing politico-ideological legitimacy and sociocultural credibility at its propaganda convenience. Indeed, such self-serving myopia in the CCP's sociohistorical vision can scarcely mask the party state's fundamental predicament—as a fragile regime tangled in its "display of power and control" (MacLeod, 2009, para. 8) and "a curiously ambivalent state of 'stable unrest'" (Chang, 2010, para. 24).

Last, despite the Chinese government's dominance in the sociopolitical sphere, public memory, as a site of uncertainty, contest, and challenge, has increasingly become a crucible fraught with opposition, contestation, and countermemory from domestic and global publics, especially over the salience or silence of historical events, the prominence or absence of partisan storylines, and the imposition or exclusion of

social experiences. Mao Yushi, a Chinese economist, offers the critique that military parades are always redolent of those totalitarian leaders' pet games and incompatible with modern civilization ("Chinese Scholars," 2009). Chinese sociologist Li Shenchi (1999) points out that the whole parade whitewashed many significant historical tragedies while it inflated China's national strength and international influence; yet the overblown latter is as unreal as the distorted former. *Lianhe Zaobao*, an influential Singaporean newspaper, editorialized that, amid Asian countries' concerns about China's economic and military expansion, it is China's cultural renewal, not saber rattling, that will help its international image ("Holding Military Parade," 2009). Jonathan Fenby (2009) writes in *History Today* that "an unusual coincidence of a series of historic anniversaries this year presents a particularly interesting moment to look back over how China has evolved in modern times," not least in terms of its grand celebration and willful negligence, which "reveal important aspects of the country's past" (para. 2). Minxin Pei (2009c) notes that, by tweaking history, "the party may be fuelling xenophobic and self-destructive ultra-nationalism that provides a short-term boost in legitimacy but limits its policy options on key issues" (para. 6).

As John Bodnar (1992) observes, official authorities tend to promote "a nationalistic, patriotic culture of the whole" at national commemorations, while the vernacular public often "convey what social reality feels like rather than what it should be like" (p. 14). This is true with Chinese memoryscape and more so from a global perspective: In light of the PRC's staged national identity, the international public tends to inspect it from a presentist standpoint of its national conditions and international relationships. If the realities bode well, so is more credible its attendant historico-political representations; if not, its commemorative discourse—however grandiose or verisimilar—seems less plausible.

Moreover, because public memory involves "fundamental issues about the entire existence of a society: its organization, structure of power, and the very meaning of its past and present" (Bodnar, 1992, p. 14), so a rhetorical inquiry into national identity construction—particularly its public memorial dimension—can "constitute an investigation into the question of whether or not various articulations of collective belonging promote intra-national and international peace" (Bruner, 2005, p. 319). In this sense, Beijing's 2009 military parade purveys, domestically and internationally, not so much a politically stable, ideologically progressive, and militarily benign country as a historically opportunistic, culturally retrogressive, and socially high-strung society.

True, with phalanxes of goose-stepping soldiers, rumbling tanks, bulky missiles, and euphoric masses, the Chinese government forcefully asserted a monolithic version of the PRC's national identity as an ancient, emergent superpower. Yet if it intends to secure political recognition, ideological legitimacy, and social credibility—and especially if "it wants to progress domestically and become a respected and respectable actor of the international system" (Moisi, 2009b, para. 8)—then it is worthwhile, at least, to reflect upon the dramatic discrepancies between its mythologized historico-symbolic discourse and untoward sociopolitical realities. Otherwise, this parade and future ceremonial spectacles would only prove Hegel's (2001) paradoxical insight on Chinese prolonged history throughout which "every change is excluded, and the fixedness of a character which recurs perpetually takes the place of what we should call the truly historical" (p. 133). In this respect, a rhetorical perspective, and a public memory probe in particular, yields fleeting glimpses into the foundation, constitution, and, perhaps, prospect of this projected leading nation.

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