

Reanchoring an Ancient, Emergent Superpower: The 2010 Shanghai Expo, National Identity, and Public Memory

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From May through October, 2010, Shanghai hosted the 41st World Expo. Amid China's contemporary ascendancy, this event provided a valuable glimpse into the country's sociopolitical circumstances and communicative dynamics. Employing public memory as the theoretical framework to examine this national spectacle, I argue that the Chinese government executed a publicity campaign to construct its national identity as an ancient, emergent superpower by deploying historical resources for political legitimation and ideological recognition. Such memorial invocations betrayed China's rhetorical (con)quest to reanchor its communist leadership as historically continuous, ideologically inevitable, and culturally indigenous. Moreover, the tension between official assertions and public reactions not only reveals the Chinese government's political, ideological, and communicative contradictions but illuminates the contested crucible of Chinese national identity, public memory, and sociopolitical discourse.

Keywords: Shanghai Expo, public memory, national identity, rhetorical criticism, Chinese ascendancy

From May 1 to October 31, 2010, the 41st World Expo was held in Shanghai, China, a historically evocative and culturally stylish metropolis which marked its "comeback as a major world city after decades of spartan industrialism following the 1949 communist revolution" (Bodeen, 2010, para. 1). Through the Expo's 159-year history, the 2010 Shanghai event proved exemplary and even unsurpassable, highlighting an unprecedented number of participating countries, organizations, journalists, and spectators from around the world. Yet the Expo's implications extend still further: As the largest Expo, which attracted 73 million visitors (plus 82.3 million virtual visitors to its portal Expo Shanghai Online), it is the first time that this traditionally industrialized countries' proprietary party was hosted by a developing country. In effect, at this "biggest, most expensive expo since the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London" (Kurtenbach, 2010a, para. 2), the Chinese government choreographed not just the "greatest show on earth" in the Expo's history (Moore, 2010, para. 1) but a massive publicity campaign at this "elaborate nation branding event" (Minter, 2010, para. 3).

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While global observations from a myriad of political, economic, social, and cultural perspectives have proliferated, little attention has been devoted to the public memory dynamics of this event, especially how it historically intersected Chinese national identity from a communicative standpoint. Such an interrogation is important because this Expo intimately involves what Michael Bruner (2002) would call "a never-ending and politically consequential rhetorical struggle over national identity" (p. 1). In part, such a research blank lies in the broad range of exhibitionary artifacts China presented for this occasion, which pose conceptual challenges and methodological difficulties for theoretical encapsulation and analytical interpretation. As Michael McGee (1990) suggests, amid "the fragmentation of contemporary culture," communicative discourse "ceases to be what it is whenever parts of it are taken 'out of context'," and thus assumes more textual contingency (p. 283). To unpack such artifactual complexity, I approach this communicative event from a public memory vantage point to accommodate its textual diversity while integrating its thematic continuity. Through a memorially oriented rhetorical examination of this publicity event, I seek to explicate the Chinese government's communicative imperatives, memorial intervention, and identity configuration.

Conceptually, the analytical cogency of a public memory approach to this national spectacle is legitimated by the fact that the Shanghai Expo, constituted by its diverse exhibitionary artifacts, closely implicates Chinese historical heritage, cultural tradition, and collective consciousness. Moreover, since public memory has become "an important part of any examination of contemporary society's main problems and tensions" (Miszta, 2003, p. 8), this event can function as a significant barometer of the host nation's politico-ideological circumstances, historico-cultural foundation, and national perception. Thus, a public memory-centered investigation into the Shanghai Expo will produce, as Iwona Irwin-Zarecka (1994) diagnoses of collective remembrance's indexical power, an "especially rich reservoir of data, with their high degree of articulation of different framing principles making for analytically easy access" (p. 67). This is particularly meaningful for national identity dissection, because the latter is essentially "assembled out of available historical resources and incessantly negotiated between state and public representatives offering competing accounts of national character" (Bruner, 2002, p. 3). Consequently, an in-depth memorial scrutiny can yield valuable insights into "the inherent contradictions of a social system" (Bodnar, 1992, p. 14), not least its momentous national identity construction.

Through a rhetorical inquiry into the public memory dimension of the Shanghai Expo, particularly two of its most representative artifacts, I argue that, by hosting this global event, the Chinese government executed a grand publicity campaign to construct China's national identity as an ancient, emergent superpower. To this end, the Chinese authorities deliberately deployed historico-cultural resources to evoke public remembrances in pursuit of political legitimation and ideological recognition. Moreover, the Chinese government's historical representation and memorial invocation betrayed its rhetorical (con)quest to reanchor its communist leadership as historically continuous, ideologically inevitable, and culturally indigenous. However, the tension between official hegemonic assertions and public alternative reactions not only reveals the Chinese government's political, ideological, and communicative contradictions but illuminates the contested crucible of Chinese national identity, public memory, and sociopolitical discourse.

The World Expo and National Identity

Originating from French tradition of national exhibition, the first World Expo, known as "The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations," was held at the Crystal Palace, London, in 1851. Though its governing body—the Bureau International des Expositions (International Exhibitions Bureau)—came about belatedly in 1928, the Expo has evolved dramatically in thematic content, national presentation, and global impact. Thematically, the Expo has undergone three distinct stages over its one-and-a-half-century history, tracing a distinct shift from hard power to soft power in host countries' and cities' presentation (Hughes, 2012): The first stage (1851–1938) highlighted international trade, industrial prowess, and technological innovation; the second stage (1939–1987) underlined social tradition and cultural value; the third stage (1988–present) has transcended industrial-commercial achievement and sociocultural heritage to national branding of prosperity and dynamism.

In modern times, when national image has emerged to become a strategic asset in a country's soft power arsenal, and when the Expo provides a major window on a country's aggregate strengths, the Expo has offered one of the most powerful global avenues for national promotion, metropolitan-economic visibility, and politico-ideological publicity through exhibitionary signification: The 1851 London Great Exhibition marked the advent of the Industrial Revolution; the 1939 New York World Fair established the Big Apple's global preeminence; and the 1970 Osaka Expo confirmed Japan's renaissance as an industrial power. Unlike their Western cosmopolitan counterparts, which have taken their global status for granted, Asian nations have particularly yearned for the Expo's communicative power in reshaping national identity—rather like hosting the Olympics to catapult their national status via evoking a "modern hybridity . . . as a syncretism of cutting-edge modern technological industry anchored in the rich cultural histories and civilization of the East" (Collins, 2008, p. 186). This is especially true for a historically vicissitudinous country like China, which had endured a century of national shame at the hands of Western powers since the mid-19th century. As a result, its national psyche has been not only intensely "driven by a sense of national grievance over perceived humiliations . . . but also by growing an even arrogant self-confidence" (Brzezinski, 2006, p. 4).

Moreover, the Expo's global ethos is unusually appealing for the Chinese communist government whose politico-ideological dogmatism has long constrained its leverage to pitch national persona through globally recognized channels. Patently, the Expo afforded an especially kairotic outlet for the Chinese authorities to pursue their politico-ideological agenda and symbolic-rhetorical ambition over national identity construction.

National Identity and Public Memory

As a philosophical issue, identity has haunted human communities in their pursuit of self-knowledge and self-location throughout history (Bloom, 1990; Poole, 1999). If the nation, like individuals, is "the culmination of a past full of efforts, sacrifices, and devotion, going back a long way," Ernest Renan (2006) argues, then "the cult of our forefathers is the most legitimate of all, for they have made us what we are" (p. 165). Having evolved from the Western context, the construct of national identity has been broadly conceived as multidimensional, signifying "bonds of solidarity among members of communities

united by shared memories, myths and traditions" (Smith, 1991, p. 15). Such inclusive, consensual multidimensionality has rendered national identity "a flexible and persistent force in modern life and politics . . . to combine effectively with other powerful ideologies and movements" (Smith, 1991, p. 15) while providing an importantly symptomatic indicator of a country's underlying circumstances and fundamental contradictions.

This is especially true since the 19th century, when modern nation-states, in the face of a splintered social fabric, declining cultural traditions, and drastic political tumults, increasingly resorted to "invented traditions" to reclaim their historical continuity and political legitimacy in order to transform themselves into "an imagined political community" (Anderson, 1983, p. 6). Through formalization and ritualization, "invented traditions" conduce to nation building via "symbolizing social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities," "legitimizing institutions, status or relations of authority," and "inculcation of beliefs, value systems and conventions of behaviour" (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983, p. 9). All these dynamic operations cannot function without impinging on memory, for national identity "is sustained by remembering; and what is remembered is defined by the assumed identity" (Gillis, 1996, p. 3). Hence, national identities, alongside public remembrance, are "not things we think about, but things we think with" (Gillis, 1996, p. 5).

In unpacking national identity's sociopolitical functions, public remembrance offers a crucial entry point, particularly when the nation as the definitive mnemonic community predicates its vital continuity on "the vision of a suitable past and a believable future" (Misztal, 2003, p. 7). As public memory "enacts and gives substance to the group's identity, its present conditions and its vision of the future" (Misztal, 2003, p. 7), public recollection hence becomes politically consequential, ideologically instrumental, and socially revelatory, not just for politicians and nationalists but for social critics, cultural researchers, and communication scholars.

Thus, as one of the most prominent global occasions for national branding via publicity execution, the World Expo, from a public memory perspective, provides a paradigmatic case to interrogate symbolic transaction and rhetorical contestation over national identity between official sponsors and public spectators.

National Identity and Public Memory From a Communicative Perspective

Communication scholars have long observed memory's primordial significance underpinning human interaction since ancient Greece (Kennedy, 1998). In contemporary times, when memory studies in a multitude of disciplines has undergone ontological, epistemological, and sociological shifts (Halbwachs, 1992; Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, & Levy, 2011) and when "the appreciation of memory as habit is displaced by one of memory as representation" (Hutton, 1993, p. 16), communication scholars have productively reconceptualized memory's public texture and communicative potency as historicity and particularity (Browne, 1995), as collectivity and indeterminacy (Zelizer, 1995), and as consensuality and consubstantiality (Jasinski, 2001). Essentially, being "an art interested in the ways symbols are employed to induce cooperation, achieve understanding, contest understanding, and offer dissent," Kendall Phillips (2004) points out, rhetoric has always been "deeply steeped in a concern for public memories" (p. 3). In

fact, he underlines, "in a very real sense, to speak of memory in this way is to speak of a highly rhetorical process" (p. 2).

Therefore, I deploy public memory as the theoretical framework to unravel the Shanghai Expo and elucidate 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). Given that theory and method in humanities-centered communicative inquiry are conceptually co-constitutive and analytically holistic, rhetorical interpretation and critical analysis are inherently "heuristic," "pedagogic," and "moral" (Brummett, 1984, p. 103). Thus, complemented with cognate multidisciplinary scholarship, a rhetorical intersection with public memory can fruitfully provide a range of conceptual dialectics and analytical heuristics over national events, especially ceremonial productions constituted by sociopolitical configuration, historical presentation, and identity construction.

First, a rhetorical excavation into public memory highlights a semiotic interpretation revelatory of a nation's sociopolitical circumstances. Generally, the past remains dormant until some dramatic issue disrupts its politico-societal equilibrium and entails national reflection and historical revision. Public memory, when conceived by the official authorities from a presentist orientation or by the vernacular public from an experiential standpoint, discloses how historical resources and symbolic formations are competitively marshaled toward conjuring up specific imaginings of historical experiences. Barry Schwartz (1996) specifies such function as "a model of society" that embodies "its needs, problems, fears, mentality, and aspirations" (p. 908). Being "part of culture's meaning-making apparatus," collective recollection hence "establishes an image of the world so compelling as to render meaningful its deepest perplexities" (Schwartz, 2000, p. 17). As such, public remembrance 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). Inevitably, public memory becomes symbolically intertwined with and rhetorically indexical of the character of a nation's identity, especially its political realities and social conditions.

Second, a rhetorical inquiry of public memory reveals a prescriptive regime indicative of a nation's political orthodoxy and ideological hegemony. If "all symbolism harbors the curse of mediacy" (Cassirer, 1946, p. 7), then public memory, fashioned from a society's historico-cultural heritage and symbolic-rhetorical resources, cannot resonate with its subscribers without invoking primitive appeals of idealism and exemplarity. As "the form of an ideological system with special language, beliefs, symbols, and stories" (Bodnar, 1992, p. 4), public memory thus 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). As a result, public memory can serve as a constitutive rhetoric that "positions the reader towards political, social, and economic action in the material world" (Charland, 1987, p. 141), or it may assume the form of a "monumental history" constantly "in danger of being a little altered and touched up and brought nearer to fiction" (Nietzsche, 1957, p. 15). Hence, with symbolic investigation and rhetorical critique, public memory's normative manifestation can lay bare the political manipulation and ideological intervention underlying national identity construction.

Last, a rhetorical scrutiny of public memory offers an insightful probe into a nation's momentous relationship between its past and present. A nation, in Ernest Renan's (2006) vision, 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). Thus, as "a highly contested and negotiated process . . . driven by the need to create a usable past" (Wertsch, 2002, p. 40), public memory reflects our committed (dis)beliefs in past experiences and shared identity, often with emotional intensity. A rhetorical inspection into its mnemonic operation hence discloses a nation's vital dynamics at historical, political, and social levels. When a nation reverts to its past for symbolic resource and persuasive inspiration, such collective retrospection (re)produces not only "debates over the ownership of memory—its regulation, placement, and assignment of meaning" (Browne, 1995, p. 243) but particular versions of national identity. In public remembrance, John Bodnar (1992) stresses, "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).

As a conceptual framework, public memory lends itself to critically illuminating interconnection/interaction between collective remembrance and national identity. Given that communicative scholarship remains "surprisingly limited" on the rhetorical process of national identity (Bruner, 2000, p. 87), such analytical utilities are especially instrumental for not only exploring the underlying national circumstances but probing how "different strategies of remembrance (politicized forms of public memory) . . . have different consequences for the character of nations" (Bruner, 2002, p. 3). If communicative 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 interrogation into the public memorial operation of national persona is particularly suitable to deciphering the significant (dis)junctures between historical representation, national identity, and sociopolitical reality.

At a time when memory discourse, as "one of the most important symbolic resources we have" (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994, p. 67), has increasingly shaped national reconstruction and international relationships, a communicative engagement with a nation's public memoryscape regarding its identity building can be significantly illuminating, especially for a quintessentially historical nation like China, whose people can be defined as "*Homo Historiens* in every sense" (Huang, 2007, p. 180).

The Shanghai Expo's Context

Behind the Shanghai Expo's exhibitionary pageantries and ceremonial festivities, the Chinese government has confronted a growing array of communicative imperatives in recent years. Domestically, China's reform and opening up since the late 1970s have dramatically transformed but also drastically fragmented the country, an eventful period marked by rapid economic advances, growing sociocultural diversity, and increasing sociopolitical tension. Over the past decade, China has witnessed a continuous surge in social unrest, from 8,709 incidences in 1993, 87,000 in 2005 (Yu, 2007), and 90,000 in 2009

(Wong, 2010) to 180,000 instances in 2010 (He, 2016) in which peasants, workers, and urban citizens have become the leading social groups advocating for civic rights (Yu, 2007).² Meanwhile, China's public expenditure on internal security almost equaled that on national defense in 2009, and it was expected to exceed the latter after 2011, making public security the fastest growing segment of public outlays (Guan, 2010). At the same time, despite its authoritarian tradition and political domination, never before have Chinese civic activities at grassroots levels gathered such a strong momentum toward greater sociopolitical participation, signaled by a series of seething civic initiatives to investigate government malpractices and high-level corruption behind calamitous public accidents. Emblematic of this social-civic movement is the publication of *Charter 08* in 2008, cosigned by more than 300 Chinese intellectuals, journalists, and human rights activists on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This document, widely known as "China's Democratic Manifesto," aggressively demands a broad spectrum of constitutional reform and political liberalization.³

Externally, China's robust developments have engendered both euphoria and misgivings, including rising concerns over its political, economic, and military ambitions. In the face of this "chance to showcase China's rising clout and prosperity to a global audience" at the Shanghai Expo (Richburg, 2010, para. 2), the Chinese government felt obligated to reassure the world with a refurbished national image of cooperation and convergence. More importantly, despite China's resounding public relations success at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the Chinese government still needed this Expo, as "a form of power . . . of persuasion rather than of gunpowder" (Kurtenbach, 2010b, para. 3) to project culturally rooted and philosophically inspiring themes to convince the world of its political vitality, economic sustainability, and environmental benignity. "It's that attitude," Austin Ramzy (2010) of *TIME* magazine observes, that explains "why China is fully embracing the expo . . . [and] promises to make the Shanghai expo such an extravaganza" (para. 6).

For the Chinese authorities, while "display[ing] to the world a China with a civilization of more than 5,000 years" ("The Eternally Ongoing," 2010, para. 9), this media event would, as Dayan and Katz (1992) observe, "endow collective memory not only with a substance but with a frame . . . for organizing personal and historical time" (p. 211). Moreover, as a mnemonic marker, this publicity spectacle can, in Dayan and Katz's terms, "socialize citizens to the political structure," "reinforce the status of leaders," and "integrate nations" (p. 201). It is with such memorial intensity and political stake that the Shanghai Expo provided a valuable glimpse into how the Chinese government appropriated historical heritage, cultural tradition, and communicative resources in service of its politico-ideological agenda on national identity construction, alongside how domestic and global publics alternatively construed such rhetorical intervention.

² In 2003, the Chinese government started to release statistics on social unrest, but stopped doing so after 2008. Due to the sensitivity and confidentiality of such information, scholars now turn to various unofficial sources to estimate its scale and gravity.

³ So far, more than 10,000 Chinese intellectuals have signed this document. Liu Xiaobo, one of its chief drafters, won the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize for his prominent role in China's civic movement and political democratization.

The Shanghai Expo: China's Publicity Extravaganza

On May 1, 2010, the Shanghai Expo—a blend of “Sino-Western schmaltz and stiff Chinese ritual” (Higgins, 2010b, para. 4)—started off with an exuberant opening ceremony. This pyrotechnically lavish gambit formally announced the beginning of the six-month-long World's Fair in China's most avant-garde city, witnessed by 20 national heads and government executives, 246 participating countries and international organizations, 186,000 journalists, and a record number of 73 million global visitors.

From a wide array of exhibitionary artifacts China provided for this grand occasion, I focus on two representative texts for a close reading of their political intention, historical invocation, and rhetorical implication. The first artifact is the China Pavilion, because architectural heritage “provides the main components to retaining . . . a nation's character [via] expressing the nation's image and identity” (Lahoud, 2008, p. 390). Further, more than an engineering prototype, this structure, as a meticulous projection of China's national identity, possesses deeper political, ideological, and cultural overtones. The second artifact is China's premium exhibit—a giant three-dimensional animated scroll of China's most famed painting, *Along the Riverside at Qingming Festival*. This classic work depicts a panoramic river view of urban vibrancy and rural serenity of China's ancient capital Bianliang (now Kaifeng in Henan province) during the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127 AD). The deliberate choice of this drawing out of China's vast artistic repository, aggrandized by its cultural reputation and aesthetic consummation, reveals Chinese official organizers' historico-memorial mobilization, symbolic-rhetorical inflection, and politico-ideological motivation.

Moreover, among a diverse range of thematic exhibits epitomizing Chinese cultural heritage, industrial breakthrough, and economic miracle, these two texts have not only generated the most intensive global attention and media commentary but will stand out as enduring symbolic icons and representative hermeneutic specimens, exerting far-reaching influence on the global public's perception of China's national identity over the long term, as illustrated by subsequent analyses.⁴

The China Pavilion

Since its inception in 1851, the World Expo has become a premier global stage to parade host countries' economic achievement, metropolitan vitality, and sociocultural renewal. To such ends, the national pavilion has provided a prime technological medium and communicative channel to exemplify social progress, urban vibrancy, and cultural revitalization. Alongside the Expo's previous memorable structures, such as the Eiffel Tower and Seattle's Space Needle, the China Pavilion at the Shanghai Expo (see Figure 1), “as a physical display of the country's pride and growing power” (Kurtenbach, 2010b, para. 3), stands as probably one of the Expo's most eye-catching structures in physical scale, visual impact, and sociocultural symbolism.

⁴ According to the Shanghai Expo Bureau, the China Pavilion and the painting *Along the Riverside at Qingming Festival* will be kept as the permanent fixtures of this event.



Figure 1. The China Pavilion at the Shanghai Expo. Source: Xinhuanet.

Among five exhibition zones stretching along the Huangpu River, the China Pavilion is situated in Zone A along the Expo Axis—a central boulevard that leads to the main entrance of the Expo park. Surrounded by other Asian countries' modest pavilions, this \$220 million, 226-foot-high gigantic structure is, in Chinese official media parlance, "one of the largest and most important buildings showcasing the host country's economic power" (Wang, 2010, para. 4). It towers like a red upside-down pyramid with a floor space equivalent to 35 football fields and three times the average height of other pavilions. Nicknamed "The Crown of the East," the China Pavilion presents a distinctive layout of roof, inspired by a quintessential Chinese architectural device called a *dougong* (bracket) dating back more than 2,000 years (Liu, 1984).

Within Chinese living culture and building tradition, *dougong* (see Figure 2), as "a classical Chinese architectural component" (Steinhardt, 2002, p. 1), is symbolic of Chinese architectural essence (Liang, 2006). As an ingenious joint cushion buffering the roof weight on the columns while enhancing the building's resilience against earthquakes, it plays a definitive role in structurally coupling the wooden columns and the roof beams. Hence, *dougong* has been acclaimed as "the most innovative and representative component" of Chinese architecture (Zhao, 2001, p. 73). Moreover, given its critical stabilizing function, *dougong* was technically favorable to projecting ornamental roofs, which, in Chinese political and cultural tradition, symbolized the hierarchical distinction of status and wealth: The more elaborate a building's roof, the more prominent its resident's sociopolitical status. It is only natural that Chinese official media invested this imposing structure with an extensive range of political, ideological, and social significations, typified by its euphoric designations as "Oriental Crown," "Splendid China," "Ample Barn," and "Rich People" ("China Pavilion," 2010).



Figure 2. An example of dougong in traditional Chinese architecture. Source: Xinhuanet.

Yet behind the China Pavilion's cultural representation and technological symbolization, more critical communicative ploys are embedded by Chinese organizers. To begin with, this structure's design did not come about accidentally, but was selected from more than 300 entries by Chinese architects. Initially eliminated, its design was later selected by the evaluation committee to become the final choice. Its melodramatic turnaround, in the designer He Jingtang's words, was due to the fact that "It's an abstract expression of China's 5,000 years of history and the culture of 56 ethnic groups," and "every element used in the China Pavilion has its Chinese origin" (Wang, 2010, para. 10). However, as a subsidiary device between the column and beam, *dougong* was structurally subordinate and functionally supplementary, as compared with other independent components in the Chinese architecture system such as platform, entrance, patio, or roof. Thus, the prominent incarnation of such a secondary element as the core concept to construct this high-profile structure is highly strategic and hence poses a significant entry point for further rhetorical excavation.

From a communicative perspective, especially from a public memory standpoint, the China Pavilion reveals deeper rhetorical schemes and persuasive dynamics. First, its hyperbolically geometric shape—an inverted pyramid that extends incrementally wider at each layer—possesses intriguing visual cues and memorial prompts. Visually, an upside-down structure conventionally channels an observer's gaze toward its top, hence accentuating its elevated sections, particularly the uppermost part. With its raised gravity and potentially unstable posture untypical of Chinese naturalist philosophy, the China Pavilion explicitly manipulates the audiences' spatial cognition and memorial association by reducing their macro, comprehensive perspective into a micro, localized eyeshot while truncating their holistic perception into a myopic fixation. When such a magnificent yet cognitively superficial vision prevails, the structure's vertex becomes dominant and exclusive, while its foundation turns oblivious and marginal. Hence, this pavilion, rather than representing Chinese architectural tradition, overhangs as a "disproportionately out-human-sized" and "monstrous symbol of national authoritarianism" (Zhu, 2010, para. 2). Arguably, such a

refracted rendering of China's architectural tradition tends to inscribe an ideologically inflected subject position, particularly for the Chinese audience, by channeling their memorial horizon and collective consciousness toward political centralism and national exceptionalism..

Second, equally noteworthy is the China Pavilion's nuanced exploitation of Chinese imperial heritage and architectural tradition. This structure is deliberately painted the same color—a crimson, resplendent red—as Beijing's Forbidden City (the imperial palace from which China's last feudal rulers governed the country for nearly five centuries). In light of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) purported identity as the vanguard of the Chinese proletariat, such artistic conservatism betrays more of a retrogressive obsession with political orthodoxy and ideological continuity (Zhu, 2010). Moreover, the China Pavilion's location discloses rhetorically strategic deployment. Located at the central site within the Expo venue, the China Pavilion perches next to the intersection of north-south and west-east axes, with no major country's pavilion in the same zone to rival its prominence.⁵ Within the Chinese architectural system, which "puts a premium on the built environment's dialectic unity, and integrates all subsidiary components into a synergic whole" (Ma, 1999, p. 83), such a hierarchical geography is especially susceptible to highlighting the central structure's predominant grandeur. As a mnemonic prompt for most Chinese spectators' awareness of their millennial-long architectural tradition and sociocultural connotation, the China Pavilion not only takes the pride of place but implicitly subordinates all neighboring pavilions into its geopolitical scheme of national ranking and power echelon.

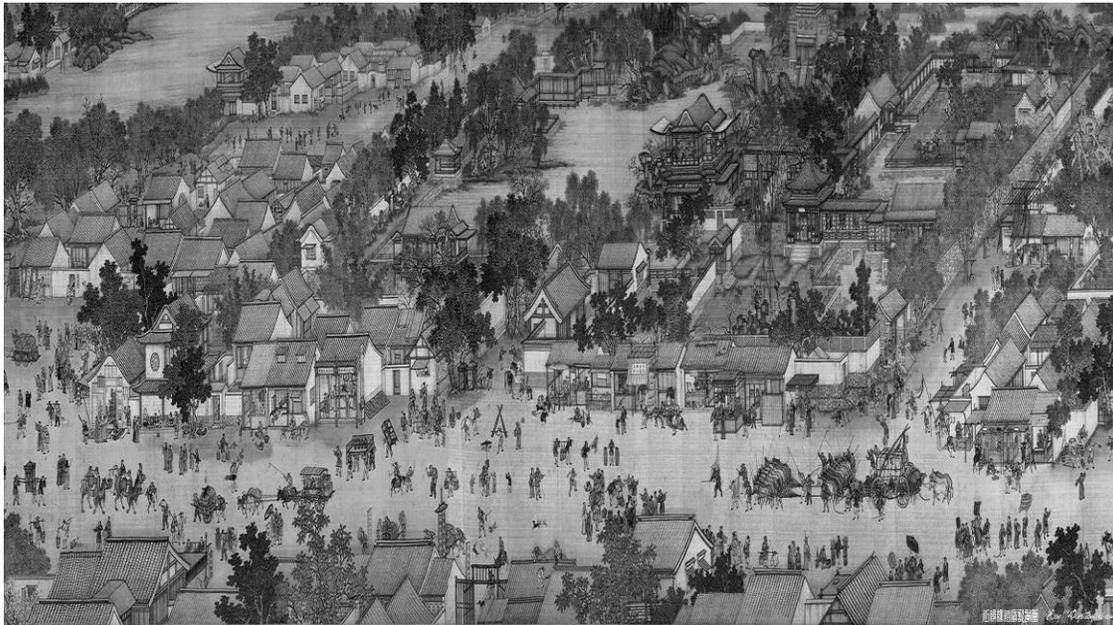
Ironically enough, on this supposedly apolitical occasion meant to prototype new ideas and technologies, the China Pavilion tactically functions as a material reproduction and cultural reincarnation of China's political ideology and social hierarchy. Regarding such theatrical contextualism and allegorical landscaping, Chinese architecture scholar Wang Guixiang dismisses it as "overtly aggressive and muscular . . . which betrays Chinese architecture's elegance, tranquility, and humility" (Wang, 2009, para. 37). Cultural critic Zhu Dake likens it to "an awkward symbol . . . flaunting bureaucratic power rather than exhibiting authentic Chinese architectural tradition" (Zhu, 2014, para. 15). Adam Minter (2010) of *The Atlantic* comments, when "the U.S. and Japanese pavilions are exiled to the far ends of the Expo site, as far from the China pavilion as physically possible, the politics are sometimes comically obvious" (para. 5). "It's the 21st century equivalent to the old tribute to the emperor," Tania Branigan (2010) of *The Guardian* alludes: "We've all always had to pay to play in China, but wind-up clocks and oompah bands are old hat so now we have to build pavilions, sponsor things, cut cheques to officials charities" (para. 11).

As such, the China Pavilion, more than architectural representation and cultural manifestation, was memorially refashioned and normatively appropriated by its official sponsors as a dual prompt—explicitly shaping the audiences' perceptions along prefigured visual, political, and cultural directions while implicitly accentuating the Chinese communist government's historical continuity, cultural orthodoxy, and political legitimacy.

⁵ In the Expo's venue layout, the medium-sized Asian and Oceanian countries' pavilions are built to the west zone adjacent to the China Pavilion, while major Western countries' (including the U.S.) pavilions are relegated to the neighborhood with African and Caribbean countries' pavilions in the far west corner.

The Animated Painting *Along the Riverside at Qingming Festival*

Just as every participating country at the Expo rolls out its latest industrial achievement and technological innovation, Chinese organizers at the Shanghai Expo also selected its exemplary exhibits to promote a national image. Inside the China Pavilion, representing China's urban evolution and metropolitan sophistication is an unusual item—a giant three-dimensional animated painting scroll based on one of China's most famous drawings, *Along the Riverside at Qingming Festival* (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3. One section of the Chinese classical painting *Along the Riverside at Qingming Festival*.
Source: Xinhuanet.**

Socioculturally, this “great realistic masterpiece” in Chinese genre painting (Jiang, 2006, p. 130) has been noted for its vivid, panoramic portrayal of urban prosperity and the social vibrancy of China's thriving capital from the 10th to 12th centuries. Originally, this elaborate piece, about 10 inches wide and 208 inches long, was created by Zhang Zeduan, an official painter affiliated with the Royal Academy of Fine Arts. Excelling at portraying social scenes, Zhang in this piece reproduced an almost encyclopedic picture of China's 12th-century urban life and social condition. By estimate, 1,659 human subjects and 209 animals are minutely re-created in their circumstantial activities, making for a consummate microcosm epitomic of national political stability, social harmony, and urban vitality. For better exhibition effects, its three-dimensional animated version at the Expo was enlarged by 30 times into a perfectly proportionate, 21-foot-tall and 420-foot-long massive scroll. While on display, this hefty, rolling piece entails 12 cinematic projectors working at the background, alternating between daytime and nighttime scenes.

From a sociopolitical standpoint, this remarkable work of art could hardly be more memorially affectionate with the Chinese audience. In Chinese history, the Northern Song Dynasty brought to an end prolonged warlordism and social disunity, heralding a long-awaited era of political peace and social rehabilitation. It was also during this period that China achieved a pinnacle in cultural creativity, technological advance, and economic prosperity. For example, this period embraced a new heyday in China's intellectual development, as most Chinese scholars concur that, through a millennium of evolution, Chinese culture, including its painting, reached a peak around this era (Cahill, 1984; Du & Jin, 2003). The French sinologist Jacques Gernet (1996) calls this time "China's renaissance" (p. 297). The British academician Joseph Needham (1990) labels it "The Golden Age" in China's science and technology (p. 138). For the Chinese people, this dynasty draws forth recollections of political liberalism, social progress, and cultural diversity; likewise, no mnemonic prompt could be more imaginatively vicarious than a panoptic, verisimilar painting evocative of those *auld lang syne*.

Moreover, what may be communicatively imperceptible yet rhetorically significant lies in this painting's creative ingenuity, for it deploys, contrary to its Western artistic counterpart, a quintessential Chinese drawing technique called *scattered perspective*. Such a diffusive focus employs multiple vantage points to portray a holistic scene of the subject while ensuring every element is represented in its original detail and proportion. This panoramic tactic contrasts sharply with Western painting's *focused perspective*, a mode of linear, single-point visuality marked by the "combination of an objective, scientific rationality and an empirically accessible material" suitable for distilling an analytical perception of the subject (Dorst, 1999, p. 99). By comparison, a scattered perspective is instrumental to creating a natural, ambient experience, and more so when a meticulous work of considerable size is enlarged into a sprawling canvas and punctiliously retouched into a storied three-dimensional animation. Before such a memorially intimate and visually sweeping exhibit, any spectator would be overwhelmed by its physical magnitude and perceptual immensity.

However, what is most critical in this painting is not even its artistic creativity or physical scale but its psycho-cognitive potency of chain proselytization with spectators: Standing before such a minute, immersive spectacle, scarcely any viewer would not be awed by its artistic ingenuity; neither would such an awestruck viewer question its historical authenticity, doubt China's erstwhile prosperity, or challenge its contemporary government's historical continuity and political lineage. With such an evocative sleight of hand, the Chinese government painstakingly inspired domestic audiences' historico-cultural imagination and predisposed their sociopolitical susceptibility for political legitimation, ideological recognition, and social cohesion.

However, when placed in an expanded historical context, this painting is riddled with political baggage and rhetorical vulnerability. Politically, the Northern Song Dynasty was established by a military general via a *coup d'état*, and the new sovereign drastically scaled back the military apparatus lest he repeat his predecessor's tragedy. This overt precaution effectively centralized national administration but also debilitated national defense to the extent that the border peace was maintained by regularly conceding tributes to northern nomadic tribes. This pacifist policy proved so fragile that six decades later the capital was sacked and the emperor was captured by the nomadic invaders—a poignant national disgrace chronicled in most Chinese textbooks. Besides, Zhang Zeduan, as the royal painter, primarily

created artistic works to cater to his master's aesthetic imagination and political fantasy. Conceivably, this painting's flamboyant vista of national stability, economic prosperity, and social harmony would very likely delight his royal patron with an immense sense of greatness and immortality.

Nevertheless, constituted by "grammars that transform the perceptible into nonobvious meanings," this painting would function, in Murray Edelman's (1988) anatomy of political language's illusive capacity to reflect social reality, as "a form of action that generates radiating chains of connotations while undermining its own assumptions and assertions" (p. 103). By tapping into Chinese artistic treasury and historical imagining, the Chinese authorities deftly substitute public memory's normative potency ("a model for society") for its semiotic function ("a model of society"), making for what Cheryl Jorgensen-Earp and Lori Lanzilotti (1998) would define as "official expression," which "tends to emphasize an abstract ideal that apparently does not threaten, and in many ways support, the status quo" (p. 152).

Reception and Implication

Throughout the Shanghai Expo's duration, Chinese and global commentaries were swift and effusive. China's official Xinhua News Agency (2010b) proclaimed it "a fulfillment of a Chinese centennial dream, and a passionate embrace of China's 5,000-year civilization with the world" (para. 8). John Boudreau (2010) of *The San Jose Mercury News* commented, "If the 2008 Beijing Olympics was China's postcard to the world, the Shanghai World Expo is the nation's coming out party" (para. 1). Fred Bernstein (2010) of *Architect* magazine observed, the Shanghai Expo is "far more than design—it is a brilliant act of international diplomacy . . . for China's largest city to announce itself as a cultural and economic powerhouse" (para. 6). At "a metropolis that once symbolized subjugation by the West," Andrew Higgins (2010b) of *The Washington Post* construed, "[the Expo] showcases their country as a potent but peaceful world power" (para. 1). Mark MacKinnon (2010) of *The Globe and Mail* wrote, "Expo 2010 confirms how China has moved to the world's centre stage" (para. 1). "The obvious conscious message is that China has arrived," Jose Villarreal, U.S. Expo Commissioner General, opined, "We are basically celebrating China's emergence as a world power" (Higgins, 2010a, para. 3).

Amid such glowing observations surrounding this event, the Shanghai authorities stressed that its success was primarily attributable to the CCP's central leadership and the socialist system's political superiority, while the Chinese central government called on the whole country to rally behind the CCP and uphold the socialist system with Chinese characteristics (Xinhua News Agency, 2010a). Clearly, behind this seemingly commercial and technological event lay a deeper array of the Chinese government's rhetorical maneuvers, designed to memorially engage Chinese and global audiences for political, ideological, and sociocultural objectives.

Such aspirations are especially acute when confronted with seething civic movements and widespread sociopolitical challenges. The Chinese government could not let slip this Expo—a golden public relations opportunity—to make a compelling statement for its political legitimacy, ideological viability, and social credibility. In its endeavor to secure the status quo, hardly any other communicative recourse can

be a more efficient sociopolitical stabilizer and psycho-cognitive placebo than these two memorial artifacts—the China Pavilion and the painting *Along the Riverside at Qingming Festival*.

The choice of the China Pavilion reveals the Chinese authorities' pursuit of historical continuity and cultural orthodoxy. By disproportionately magnifying a structurally supplementary element—*dougong*—into a visually dominant and psychologically glorifying structure, this ostentatiously crimson, monarchically reincarnated structure stands as a cacophonous misfit both within Chinese architectural tradition and amid the otherwise soothing Expo milieu (Wang, 2009). Moreover, when overloaded with blanket Chinese philosophical, political, and cultural symbolism, this elaborate, heavy-duty architecture exposes more of its official sponsor's nationalistic obsession and ideological parochialism (Wang, 2009) than an ancient, emergent superpower's putatively historical maturity and cultural magnanimity. Last, when national pavilions are intended to "*exhibit the means at man's disposal for meeting the needs of civilization*" (Bureau International des Expositions, 2010, para. 2), the China Pavilion, in its representation of Chinese cultural and philosophical heritage, ironically bespeaks the host's penchant for historical orthodoxy, cultural conservatism, and political reactionism. More tellingly, if public memory functions as "an expressive symbol—a language, as it were, for articulating present predicaments" (Schwartz, 1996, p. 910), then this structure pointedly betrays the CCP government's vehement pursuit of political legitimacy, ideological hegemony, and social stability at a time when all those foundations have been unprecedentedly challenged.

For the painting *Along the Riverside at Qingming Festival*, its rationale as the exemplary exhibit of China's national image is not far-fetched at all. As analyzed above, this mediated, decontextualized painting, with its scrupulous detail, hyperbolic visuality, and dioramic realism, implicitly furnishes a sociopolitical utopia—"a model for society" for its official organizers to prosecute political legitimation, ideological identification, and social rationalization. However, no memorial artifact can be gratuitously appropriated to underwrite any political agenda or ideological doctrine without invoking public memory's indexical function as "a model of society." Examined from a broader historical context, the choice of this classic work discloses what Michael Bruner (2000) would call "narrative absences . . . [that] always accompany articulations of collective belonging" (p. 103). Moreover, if official memory, in Foucault's (1977) words, tends to be "fixed, through its history, in rituals, in meticulous procedures that impose rights and obligations" (p. 150), then a reconstituted, historiographical dissection of this freighted painting illustrates what Foucault would propose as "counter-memory" (p. 144), which constantly problematizes the Chinese government's monolithic representation and significantly countervails its exploitive interpretation.

Inevitably, public memory, as "a site of uncertainty, contest, and change" (Browne, 1995, p. 243), has become a competitive domain between the Chinese government and the domestic/global public. As a parody of the Shanghai Expo's theme "Better City, Better Life," local artist Chen Hangfeng exhibited an installation titled "Bubble City, Bubble Life" to mock the Shanghai authorities' obsession with money and prestige (Moore, 2010). Though "the Expo's global participation signals the host nation's robust ascendancy," cultural critic Zhu Dake warns, "Just like the Beijing Olympics, after all the pomp and pageantry, China will remain the same as ever, orbiting within its logical rut" (Zhu, 2010, para. 22). Despite its urbanization strides, "China's political fragility is also evident," as David Ignatius (2010) of *The Washington Post* reminds us: "This new China is at once cocky and scared—anxious looking over its

shoulder even as it races ahead" (para. 4). Dubbing it "a campaign of mass distraction," political scientist Anne-Marie Brady comments, "The hoopla surrounding it is aimed at helping Chinese people feel positive about their country . . . [while] distracting them from other, more depressing issues. In China today, the non-political is in fact deeply political" (Branigan, 2010, para. 13). Consequently, such extensive contestations from domestic and global publics have increasingly challenged the Chinese authorities' political hegemony and historical monopoly.

China's National Identity, Public Memory, and Sociopolitical Discourse

"A society becomes visible to itself and to others [through its cultural heritage]," Jan Assmann (2011) aptly observes, and "which past becomes evident in that heritage and which values emerge in its identificatory appropriation tells us much about the constitution and tendencies of a society" (p. 215). *Vis-à-vis* the Chinese government's sociopolitical intervention and national branding at the Shanghai Expo, Chinese and global public receptions have proved politically revelatory and socially diagnostic, from which we can glean a few insights into the contemporary crucible of Chinese national identity, public memory, and sociopolitical discourse.

First, China's official hegemonic assertions in the public memory domain demonstrate that its national identity remains precariously tethered to its historical tradition and cultural foundation. Since its "century of national humiliation" at the hands of Western colonial powers from the mid-19th century (Callahan, 2010, p. 67), generations of Chinese politicians have striven to reinstate the nation from its modern decline back to the erstwhile glory by rehabilitating historical traumas while resuturing national identification. Yet such national redemption, as illustrated by the CCP government's legitimacy-oriented rhetorical intervention in public memory sphere, is neither secure nor sustainable. Revealingly, at this putatively forward-looking technological and commercial Expo, the Chinese authorities opted to retrogressively exploit imperial-dynastic heritage and historico-mnemonic sensibility to evoke identificatory imaginings toward national identification. Such a "historical turn" not only exposes the dwindling efficiency of its conventional political mobilization and ideological imposition but highlights the CCP authorities' communicative sophistication and propagandistic opportunism. Such a hypocritical approach, albeit instrumental toward national identity building, nevertheless culminates in a fundamental incongruity underlying its national persona: Self-claimed as a brand-new political party and representative vanguard of the Chinese proletariat in its national history, the CCP government's obsession with legitimate continuity from the national past exposes its fatal incapacity to achieve critical departure and genuine transcendence over the country's imperial-feudal baggage. In fact, the more it contrives "inherited orthodoxy" to heighten its "Mandate of Heaven," the more its staged national identity trivializes its purported political mission and ideological eschatology.

Second, multivocal rhetorical contestation in the public memory terrain shows that China's sociopolitical circumstances have increasingly become a foundational baseline for historico-cultural representation and sociopolitical perception by domestic and global publics, particularly over national identity. As John Bodnar (1992) points out, 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 especially true for contemporary

Chinese public remembrance, which, no longer dominated by official historical monopoly and political hegemony, has become unprecedentedly complicated by such an experiential, grassroots benchmark. Amid the fluid context in which neither “the concepts of manipulation and propaganda nor the related concepts of dominant ideology and false consciousness” can encapsulate today’s Chinese historical sensibility and authoritarian configuration (Zhang & Schwartz, 1997, p. 207), such a “productive critical interrogation of the politics of public memory” (Bruner, 2000, p. 102) has figured more and more prominently in Chinese and global publics’ perceptions of China’s emergent national identity.

In “making sense of the present and thus for extending the continuous present out to edges of the personal and collective horizons of time/space,” public memory affords what Andrew Hoskins (2007) defines as “a central resource” (p. 18). This is most pertinent to a historically constituted, sociopolitically authoritarian country like the People’s Republic of China when negotiating its profound yet polysemous past for national identity at the Shanghai Expo. By “formulating a critical practice for ‘diagnosing’ collective identities through the analysis of competing discourse/texts that create, sustain and/or transform them” (Bruner, 2005, p. 312), this essay not only contributes to the current conversation on China’s national ascendancy and prospective trajectory but, more crucially, sheds important light on the vital nexus among its national identity, public memory, and sociopolitical discourse, for it is precisely due to such “extraordinarily popular and rapidly multiplying commemorative rhetorics in whose renovated narratives of national belonging our future may (not) lie” (Biesecker, 2002, p. 406).

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