Performance, Meaning, and Ideology in the Making of Legitimacy: The Celebrations of the People’s Republic of China’s Sixty-Year Anniversary

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Abstract

This article analyzes how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) used the 60-year anniversary of the People’s Republic of China to construct its legitimacy. We analyze the elaborate celebrations, which involved not only a large-scale military parade, but also a civilian pageant and

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various cultural products. By adopting a discourse analytical approach, our analysis shows how the celebrations were devised explicitly with a domestic audience in mind, and how they represented an attempt to bridge the various ruptures between contemporary Chinese modernity and the nation’s revolutionary past. Even though this attempt was highly pervasive, we nevertheless find that China’s propaganda experts could not achieve their goal in full.

The first of October 2009 marked the 60-year anniversary of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The elaborate celebrations, which involved not only official activities such as forums, intellectual conferences, and a large-scale parade but also various cultural products, such as art exhibitions, TV series, and movies, have again brought questions to the fore that have occupied students of political science and of China for roughly two decades.

Ever since the fall of communist rule in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, many Western observers have been waiting for the PRC to become part of what Huntington called the “Third Wave”: the last series of states that would transform from authoritarian into liberal democratic systems. However, the degree to which the Chinese leadership rejects Western-style political reforms while simultaneously liberalizing the economy and opening up China to the world continues to puzzle scholars: How, so the question goes, has China not followed the path of other formerly closed political systems and moved from totalitarianism to authoritarianism and then finally toward liberal democracy? How has the PRC defied what is otherwise regarded as an inevitable transition, based on a shift in values that should come naturally with economic reform, and has nevertheless retained its political legitimacy?

This article addresses these questions by examining the ways in which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) uses ideological means to justify its one-party rule over mainland China. To this end, we analyze how the 2009 anniversary celebrations featured into the CCP’s legitimization strategy and how the Party and the Chinese state apply rituals, performances, and cultural products to reinvent their legitimacy basis. Michael Shapiro has referred to such practices as “cultural governance,” a term that describes processes of cultural representation that constitute and legitimize sovereignty. Cultural governance aims to strengthen specific discourses, while preventing those that challenge sovereignty. In essence, this means regulating society by regulating culture. Such processes