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MEGA-EVENTS AND NATIONALISM: THE 2008 OLYMPIC TORCH RELAY

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This paper focuses on the relationship between the 2008 Beijing Olympic Torch Relay mega-event and contemporary imaginings of China's geopolitical position and the Chinese national geo-body. The performance of China's territorial presence at the international and domestic scales drew both support and resistance. Chinese media coverage of the spectacle reiterated tropes of geopolitical struggle and national unity. While these tropes resonated with some Chinese audiences who have been primed to recognize the Chinese geo-body through the banal nationalism, Chinese citizens' satirical online comments reveal that some rejected the stilted ideological representations of the Relay. Further, protesting groups' high profile disruptions of the Relay mega-event outside of the national territory of the host country worked to undermine the Relay's international reception. Drawing from analyses of Chinese and international media sources and Chinese Internet satire, this article suggests that the scripted nature and geographical extent of mega-events compromises the geopolitical and nation-building aspects of such events in both neoliberal and postsocialist contexts.

Keywords: *China, mega-event, nationalism, Olympics, satire*

TORCH RELAY AS GEOGRAPHICAL MEGA-EVENT

The term “mega-event” is, in a way, a misnomer, because any given mega-event is really an aggregate of many events that occur over an allotted period of time. Such is the case of the Olympic Games. Included within the 2008 Beijing Olympics was a series of international and domestic events titled the Olympic Torch Relay. The international Relay was designed to course through major cities on six continents. These events became sites where the tightly scripted relay performance was vulnerable. Activists attended them to protest China's geopolitical affairs in Tibet, Sudan, and other places. In response the Chinese media and Chinese patriots drew from the discourse of

“national humiliation” to defend China’s pride and territorial claims. The symbolism of the Olympic Games and Relay were designed to perform a particular geographical and historical understanding of China. The domestic Relay brought the torch to every province of China, inscribing the geo-body of the Chinese nation in all corners of the country. However, both the spatial extension of the mega-event and its stilted performance threatened to unravel its organizers’ messaging. Online reaction to the formulaic discourses of the Chinese state, Chinese official media, and Western media reveals how the messaging of Torch Relay mega-event was compromised even without physical disruption.

Although mega-events have the potential to become platforms for political ideology (Ritchie 1984), the Olympics make a poor ideological platform because of their indissoluble connection to nationalism. Nationalism lacks any universal logic or unified theory and so it doesn’t sit comfortably in the category of “ideology” (Anderson 2006). This paper explores how in the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Chinese nationalism was deployed both in the discourse of the Relay mega-event and in media and public responses to Relay disruptions. The nationalism surrounding the mega-event is difficult to easily categorize. Although the Chinese state has attempted to resuscitate a managed form of nationalism in recent decades (Zheng 1999), multiple Chinese nationalisms have emerged in contemporary China.

Furthermore, other Chinese publics responded to the relay with skepticism towards the Relay’s geopolitical and nationalist implications. One explanation for this phenomenon is that mega-event promoters and the media outlets that cover the events tend to repeat political discourses to the point that, due to the event’s scale and duration, those discourses begin to strain. The very oversaturation during the event period of the images and language of the Beijing Games led some Chinese to interpret the Olympics in ironic, playful, or politically resistant ways.

Following the studies of Alexei Yurchak and his colleagues on humor in late socialist Russia and late liberalist America (Boyer and Yurchak 2010; Yurchak 2006; Yurchak 1997), as well as theorists of contemporary Chinese online humor, this paper explores the possibilities of satirical humor in compromising mega-event promoters' attempts to propagate geopolitical visions and territorial claims.

MEGA-EVENTS, OLYMPICS, AND NATIONALISM

The Olympic Games are among the most prominent of global mega-events. J.R. Brent Ritchie was among the first to bring "major sports events" under the banner of the mega-event. In so doing, he proposed to that these events could be studied for their political effects. Among the positive outcomes that organizers could pursue were the "enhanced international recognition of [a] region and its values," and the "propagation of political values held by [a] government and/or population" (Ritchie 1984: 4). More recently, in an analysis of World Expos and the Olympic Games, Maurice Roche (2000) argues that by way of these global mega-events, cultural elites attempt to create an ideological product for the audience's consumption. Drawing from Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1992) work on the invention of tradition, Roche proposes that the pomp of mega-events is efficacious in creating a sense of pleasure for its audience; the dramaturgical experience of the mega-event allow elite ideology to be realized. The mega-event format of the Olympics lends the Games to ideological loading. Recently, Max Müller has described the Russian government's casting of the 2014 Sochi games as a showcase of national greatness while managing private development; he calls Russia's strategy project *state dirigisme*, or state direction (Müller 2011).

A common cry heard during the 2008 Olympics, in all parts of the world, was to keep politics out of them. Yet the modern Olympic Games have always been utilized for political purposes. Indeed, the Olympics take their very design from the international system. Considering how the Olympics would fit into international politics, the founder of the Games, Pierre de Coubertin made a distinction between “cosmopolitanism” and “true internationalism.” Whereas the former would be a celebration of the eradication of difference, Coubertin stressed that the latter is the Olympics' goal: cooperation *in* difference (MacAloon 1981). Despite Coubertin's alleged intentions, sports cooperation has seldom led to national cooperation as world powers pursue gold medal counts, and the Games' spectacular stage is seized for its political potential.

Exploiting this internal tension between difference and unity has allowed enterprising national governments to use the Olympics Games in general, and the Olympic Torch Relay in particular, to promote political interests in ways that are of interest to this study. The relay has given nation-states a global platform to raise the profile of their national interests and their geopolitical aspirations through increased media and popular attention. This is illustrated in even the very first modern torch relay, which began the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, an event memorably recorded in the opening sequences of Leni Riefenstahl's 1938 film *Olympia*. Torch runners are shown carrying the torch through Europe from Greece, implying a link between Nazi Germany and an imagined (European) cosmopolitan past. The USSR and the US, in 1980 and 1984 respectively, both conducted large-scale relays incorporating different local and national organizations to generate enthusiasm and support for their upcoming Games. The USSR ran the torch through Eastern Bloc states and the US ran the relay through the “heartland” of America (Cahill 1998). This tracing of the regional or national territory, in tandem with the eventual boycott

of each others' Games, reveals the geopolitical utility of the mega-event. Political blocs are performed and opposed to each other with great visibility.

Susan Brownell is a leading critic of those who would view the Chinese Olympics as a predominantly nationalist or ideological project. In her studies, she has revealed the lack of a state-directed program for the presentation of China to the outside world (Brownell 2008). At the domestic level, she has revealed that the intent and content of the nation-wide primary and secondary education "Olympic Education" curriculum that was introduced in the years before the Olympics began was not political indoctrination, but a humanistic program based on promoting physical activity and the Olympic spirit (Brownell 2009).

Granted the complexity of the Chinese state and a serious commitment to sports education, the pageantry of the Olympics in general, and the Olympic Torch Relay in particular, was indeed designed to perform China. The Relay reiterated the historic depth and geographical extent of the Chinese geo-body and, globally, China's geopolitical presence. However, the focus on the nation in the Relay does not equate to ideological propagation; the nation and nationalism are not reducible to a system of thought.

Scholars have offered differing explanations as to the conditions and cohesive power of the nation. Well-known studies of the nation have revealed it as the result of the quest to found a community in its historical roots (Smith 1987) or the imagined shared experiences and culture of a people (Anderson 2006). Appeals to Chinese character and shared history have been examined in works on the discourse of nationalism in modern China (Dikötter 1992; Leibold 2007). As socialist ideology began its slow retreat after Deng Xiaoping's reforms, a curriculum of "patriotic education" has been instituted by the Chinese government to bolster state allegiance (Wang 2012). The nationalist sentiment constructed through this program has mixed with other popular forms of

nationalism. For instance, recent scholars have pointed to the existence of “patriotic professionalism” (Hoffman 2006) and “filial nationalism” (Fong 2004). Their studies show how the nation takes on significance not as a static concept, but as an emotive site where the market, family, and national pride meet, at which anxieties about moving away from home and kin mix with cosmopolitan dreams, and where citizens desire to bolster and bring pride to their imagined nation.

Clearly many nationalisms surround contemporary China. When a state or media appeals to the nation as though it were simply another system of political values or ideology, the reception is difficult to guarantee. The 2008 Olympic Torch Relay provides an example of just such an imperiled mega-event political project.

GEOPOLITICS AND THE INTERNATIONAL TORCH RELAY

The Torch Relay was a major component of the 2008 Olympic mega-event. Lasting four and a half months, the Relay brought the torch to all six participating continents. Along the way the torch attracted the attention of groups hoping to upset China’s discursive and chorographical monopoly. The majority of protesters were concerned with China’s controversial policies in Tibet, Xinjiang, or Sudan. Chinese official news media would label these protestors as foreign elements working to embarrass and weaken China. Many of the media tropes that arose during the clamor of the international relay were enabled by patriotic education. This form of education, which has been in effect since the early 1990s, teaches Chinese students about their long history of humiliation at the hands of Westernized powers and the internal enemies that aided them. After the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising, Jiang Zemin moved to develop patriotic education (Wang

2012). The “national humiliation” that this project stresses encourages young Chinese to embrace the trauma of China’s pre-PRC past. In teaching nationalism in this way, the Party risks instilling its people with a political passion that can ultimately be de-coupled from the very government that set it forward, as Yongnian Zheng writes: “[the new] nationalism is a double-edged sword. It could be used to strengthen the political legitimacy of the regime, but it also could result in political chaos. What the leadership wants is not to simply appeal to popular nationalism, but to reconstruct an official nationalism that can strengthen its political legitimacy while maintaining socio-political stability” (Zheng 1999, 199). While nationalism can be a resource for the Chinese Communist Party, it can also be a threat.

Historic territory and its defense or restoration has taken a salient position in the recent iteration of Chinese nationalism. Callahan (2009) has shown how Chinese elites have produced and circulated “normative maps” that seek to instill a narrative of national humiliation, which is an aspect of patriotic education. Representations of national geo-bodies can work to reconfigure and animate the history of the mapped nation (Winichakul 1994). Chinese national humiliation maps portray the land lost during the late Qing and National Periods to European treaty-port concessions, Russian encroachment into Manchuria, and other events as attacks on the very body of China. Alongside illustrations of these humiliating losses are explanations implicating foreign powers in the dismemberment and weakening of China. Such maps are found in school textbooks and have been picked up in popular culture. For instance, during domestic torch relay events, one shirt that was widely worn showed the Chinese national flag in the shape of the national territory. The phrase “Torch in heart, Tibet in China” was written on the shirt. Disputes over territories such as Taiwan and Tibet threaten China’s national narrative as a strong, benevolent, and legitimate modern state and bring about cartographic anxiety. For China to defend its territory is to maintain

its very national identity (Krishna 1994). John Agnew (2012) has argued that the intellectuals of Chinese statecraft have turned to the imagined stability of China's pre-humiliation history to lay claim to control over China's most sensitive border territories. By arguing for the naturalness of China's territory, geopolitical threats such as splittist forces can be explained stemming only from outside anti-Chinese forces. The source of territorial anxieties can be territorialized outside of China, and set against the unity of the Chinese motherland.

The oppositions used to structure the discourse of national humiliation include civilized/barbarian, domestic/foreign, and hero/traitor (Callahan 2010). These binaries appear in many media portrayals of Relay disruptions, and are very salient in the rhetoric of nationalistic Chinese youth that grew up with patriotic education. In the logic of national humiliation the same aggressor countries that humiliated China in the 19th and early 20th centuries may be suspected of continuing to seek the country's disempowerment today. Accordingly, internal groups that seek independence or increased autonomy are viewed as working under the influence of foreign powers, and are therefore complicit China's humiliation.

To show how the geopolitical tropes of national humiliation have circulated during the Relay mega-event, this section analyzes the texts of two prominent news outlets: People's Daily and Xinhua. A study of regional and sources that deviate further from party discourse, such as the Southern Daily, would reveal greater discrepancies in reportage. However, limiting this study to these two news outlets allows for an exploration of the most widespread media discourse on the Olympics and illustrates official media use of nationalistic and geopolitical tropes. Using the Oripoke People's Daily archive and other searchable databases, I reviewed dozens of articles covering the first three months of the torch relay, from March to May 2008. Articles were analyzed

for their depiction of the Olympic Torch Relay, their portrayals of relay disrupters, and their descriptions of those allegedly aiding those activists.

After the March 15th Lhasa Riots, the Chinese government actively associated “Tibetan independence splittists” with Western countries seeking to subvert China (Callahan 2010, 56). During the Relay criticism was focused on Tibetan elements that sought to ruin the Games for audiences worldwide. Splittists’ “shameless,” “violent,” and “disgraceful” behavior deserved the repudiation and scorn of the global community. Furthermore, the Tibetan splittists are cast as outside elements seeking to destroy the unity of the 56 nationalities living in the Chinese motherland. Against these splittists are cast the heroes of the Torch Relay, such as Jin Jing, a wheelchair bound fencer who battled to keep the flame alight as protestors attempted to pry it out of her hands.

Negative Western coverage of both the Lhasa Riots and the Olympic Torch Relay led to multiple forms of protest in China. Anti-French protests broke out after then-President Sarkozy threatened to boycott the Olympics and officials from Carrefour, a French grocery chain with locations in China, expressed sympathy with Tibetans. The People’s Daily expressed empathy with the grocery protestors, but implored protestors to stay within the confines of the law. The head of the supermarket chain was forced to deny rumors that he was funding the “Dalai Lama Clique” (Wei 2008; He and Xi 2008).

The Chinese media sought to portray the relay protests as orchestrated by small numbers of external splittists with a self-serving agenda. The People’s Daily criticized those who sought to “manufacture unrest” and obstruct the “peace-themed Olympics” (People’s Daily 2008). Xinhua news downplayed the presence of the “few protestors” attempting to “sabotage” the torch or carrying out “obvious act[s] of defying the Olympic spirit” (Xinhua News 2008a). Even while

blaming those disrupting the relay and the conspiracies enabling them, the Chinese media emphasized the universal message of the Olympics. The Chinese state television station CCTV eventually launched a website documenting the outpourings of public adulation and support for the relay around the world. This site, no longer functional, was titled “Say No to Violent Disruption, Show Respect to Olympic Flame.” The website was entirely in English and directed at an international audience. Showing images of foreigners holding Chinese flags and quotes from foreign officials condemning disruptions of the relay, the site provided proof that people all over the world are indeed excited by the torch and the Chinese Olympics.

While the Chinese government avoided explicitly implicating foreign powers during the torch relay, many members of the Chinese public directly implicated the states where relay disruptions took place. The journalist Evan Osnos (2008) reported on the phenomenon of *fenqing*, or angry youth, who were young Chinese that took to the Internet to defend China from perceived Western attempts to undermine their home country’s integrity. Chinese youth abroad noticed the discrepancies in Chinese and foreign reportage of Relay incidents and went online to redress what they perceived as inaccurate and unfair depiction of the events in non-Chinese media. Nyíri, Zhang and Varrall (2010) see the overseas Chinese reaction not as an example of a filial nationalism, but of a “hip nationalism” in which Chinese youth worked were mainly concerned with their own social sphere and personal expressions of cosmopolitanism and creativity. Must students’ international experiences and desires be so distinctive against a filial nationalism? The authors quote an ethnically Chinese Australian citizen that wrote the following in a post intended to gather support for a high pro-Chinese turn-out at the Canberra Torch Relay run:

My dear compatriots, are you willing to stand by and watch as our Sacred Flame is sullied by these degenerates and anti-Chinese running dogs? Can you tolerate footage humiliating our Fatherland

appearing in the world's media at their pleasure? Grandchildren of the Yellow Emperor and the Emperor Yan with a Chinese heart sojourning in Australia... the Sacred Olympic Flame needs you, please extend your patriotic pair of hands, support Canberra and the Peking Olympics. (Nyíri, Zhang, and Varrall 2010, 39)

Indeed, the authors found a great deal of such language during their first-hand account of the Canberra relay run. The binary of hero and traitor, which they reveal as frequently used, is part of the oppositional logic of patriotic education (Wang 2012). In another example, an online commentator suggests the following:

The recent Tibetan Independence activists' farcical interference with the torch has a deeper meaning: America is afraid of China's continuous rise and its opportunity in the Olympics to further bolster China's global prestige and threaten America's global influence.... Americans are always prepared to use every method to destroy China, against China's rising economy and military. It is clear that we are engaged in a political war. Americans really make Sunzi's Art of War come alive! Fellow citizens, be vigilant: drop your delusions and prepare for war. (Tianya.cn 2008a)

The international Torch Relay prompted the deployment of geopolitical tropes that connected the travails of the traveling Torch to a history of foreign powers' national humiliation of the Chinese nation. The Chinese media and young Chinese protestors appealed to nationalist discourse in their discussions of the events, revealing their frustrations with foreign media outlets, which, because of their own geopolitical prejudices, precluded a positive reception of the Olympic Games (Manzenreiter 2010). Within China, the tropes of patriotic education helped connect relay events to a wider discourse, allowing the angry youth to "familiarize unfamiliar situations in vocabulary drawn from some seemingly salient prior geopolitical experience" (Agnew 2009, 431).

Shortly after the international leg of the Torch Relay ended, the domestic leg began. This second Relay was specifically designed to trace the Chinese national geo-body. With fewer opportunities for political activists to disrupt the domestic relay, it was an occasion for peaceful and patriotic appreciation of Chinese diverse geography and people. However, it too attracted controversy.

UNITING THE NATION THROUGH THE DOMESTIC RELAY

I lived in China during the 2007-2008 academic year and can recall the ubiquity of Olympic imagery in product advertising, in public squares, and on the television. Olympic symbology pervaded everyday urban life. When the city of Xining welcomed the torch, university teachers canceled classes and students rushed to see the Olympic flame for themselves. Hawkers that had been following the relay city to city laid out their wares in blankets on the sidewalk: Chinese flags, hats with the five Olympic Bears, shirts with patriotic slogans, etc. The atmosphere was jubilant and bore little trace of the vitriol that had marred the international relay.

For popular audiences the Olympics were presented as images and representations that performed the geo-body of the PRC, reinforcing the territory of the nation and stilling unrest. Some of these representations include the Olympic Bears (*fuwa*), the Olympic medals, and the route of the domestic relay. The China celebrated in the Olympic symbology is one of diversity, in which particular elements of the Chinese periphery were used to define the culture and geo-body of China. As Tim Oakes (2012) argues, such visions of China that incorporate its frontiers are often paradoxical: hybrid and mixed yet somehow aspiring to be purely Chinese.

One of the most salient visual features of the 2008 Games was the team of Beijing Olympic mascots: the five bears known as the *fuwa*. Together they depict a storied Chinese heritage, representing both the past and the present. One bear, Beibei, represents a Neolithic society that persists in Chinese national lore as a hearth of Chinese civilization. Another bear, Huanhuan, is modeled on designs from the Mogao Caves in western China. This bear brings the diverse cultural history of the Silk Road under the sign of China. Yingying is a Tibetan antelope whose garb incorporates “several decorative styles from the Qinghai-Tibet and Sinkiang [Xinjiang] cultures and the ethnic design traditions of Western China” (BOCOG 2008). These Olympic icons were sold as dolls and key chains, turned into a children’s television cartoon series, and were even printed on milk packages. Often appearing near the national flag, these Olympic objects worked to playfully reinforce the Chinese nation. Furthermore, the very materiality of the Olympic medals worked to suture together China’s territory. Each medal awarded at the Olympics contained jade from the Kunlun Mountains, straddling Xinjiang and Tibet, embedding the land of restive portions of China into the medals of the Games (China Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center 2008).

The domestic torch relay route brought the torch to every Chinese Province and Province-level municipality. Local relay runs were modeled to display the particular characters of each province. This relay, like the 1984 USA heartland relay and the 1964 Japanese relay, can be interpreted as a display of both national unity, and, as in the latter case, of symbolic repatriation. In 1964 the Olympic torch was brought to all Japanese prefectures, including Okinawa. Although the American administration in Okinawa had prohibited the public display of Japan’s *Hinomaru* national flag, the torch relay became an unsanctioned occasion for public display of the national

flag and for a public showing of support for the return of Okinawa to the Japanese motherland (Shimizu 2011).

The 2008 Relay had several instances of symbolic reiteration or repatriation of territory. The relay stop at Mount Everest's base camp was one such act of imaginative national inscription. The base camp is located in China's far western province of Tibet, which, though under the sovereignty of the PRC, remains politically contested. The choreography of the relay run was a performance crafted to show that the restive Tibetan region does indeed belong in China. Chinese media promoted the presence of the torch at Mt. Everest as a triumph both of technology (the flame would be sustained even at high altitude) and of multi-ethnic unity. The large team that carried the torch included Han, Tibetans, Hui, Tu, and Tujia peoples (Xinhua News 2008b). This performance was a symbolic response to the inter-ethnic violence in Lhasa that had occurred in March of that year.

The Mt. Everest Relay run was widely derided in the Western press, already critical of recent infrastructure developments in Tibet such as the recently completed Lhasa railway. A New York Times Op-ed contributor titled his piece "The Height of Avarice" (Kodas 2007). The author lamented the road that was paved all the way to Everest's base camp, as it was yet another mark of China's encroachment into the remotest regions of Tibet. Accompanying the article was a drawing of a Chinese dragon coiled around the mountain. The Relay's symbolic claim to Everest would not be maintained for long. Shortly after the event, a Jordanian climber summited Mt. Everest from the Nepalese side; he shared photos of a Tibetan flag flying on Everest's peak. This image countered the Chinese performance and attempted to symbolically re-claim the mountain for Tibetans.

Tibet is a territory over which China is sovereign, but the Relay was also designed to perform a portion of Chinese territory that, although claimed by China, is a *de facto* independent state. Organizers' desire to hold a torch event in Taiwan challenged the global outside / national inside dichotomy of the Relay's two-stage design. The torch run in Taiwan was to be held during the international stage; however, the organizing committee scheduled the Taipei run between Relay runs in Vietnam and Hong Kong, the latter being the first officially domestic event. Because of obvious symbolic implications, the Taiwanese government disapproved of the scheduling. Taiwanese President Chen Shui-Bian accused the PRC of "politicizing the Olympics," and the PRC returned the rhetoric. Taiwan insisted on flying its national flag during the event and continued to object to a Relay design that brought the country uncomfortably close to the celebration of domestic territory (CBS News 2007; Hutzler 2007). Ultimately, a Taiwanese torch event was abandoned. The controversy surrounding Taiwan, a severed appendage of the imagined PRC Chinese geo-body, illustrates how even the international Relay can be politically charged with symbolic claims over territory.

The 2008 Olympic Torch Relay had political overtones in both its design and media outlets' interpretation of the incidents disrupting its staging. While many Chinese patriots did interpret the international Relay as a continuation of China's geopolitical and territorial tribulations, not all Chinese accepted the mega-event's official and media messaging. Nationalism makes for a fissiparous ideology, and, as will be shown below, contemporary Chinese hegemonic conditions make understanding the Chinese reception of this mega-event difficult.

SATIRE AND CONTEMPORARY MEGA-EVENTS

Through an analysis of Chinese citizens' relationship to hypernormalized language and the usage of humor in online media, this section will reveal that although the Relay was loaded with symbolism and political messaging that resonated with a generation raised on patriotic education, many Chinese took viewpoints that either exceeded the official discourse, were critical of official and commercial representations of the Relay, or sought social catharsis from the excessive formalities of official Olympic discourse.

While many Chinese at home and abroad worked to support the Olympic torch through their patriotic presence both online and at relay events, some Chinese youth rebelled against the stilted nature of Chinese and foreign media discourses by providing their own humorous interpretations of the Torch Relay and its obstacles. Its online response is revealing of the current state of Chinese nationalism and ultimately the precariousness of using mega-events for political purposes.

Alexei Yurchak (2006) and his colleagues (Boyer and Yurchak 2010) have argued that hypernormalized ideological environments, that is, institutional formations in which discourse has ossified in media outlets and other popular forums, can lead to environments of skepticism and satirical humor that cease to take seriously the discursive status quo. Yurchak argues that after Stalin called for "objective scientific laws" in linguistics, Communist language became formulaic (Yurchak 2003, 488). After Stalin's death the language of the regime began to ossify and resemble a collection variously organized clichés; speechwriters and editors were reluctant to deviate from the linguistic status quo. In short, the discursive environment became hypernormalized. As a result, Russian citizens' relationship to the state voice became increasingly ambiguous. Large scale staged public events, such as the obligatory May Day parade, became open for meaning making that often relied on mocking the official discourse or ignoring it altogether. The social life surrounding such

events allowed for moments of social catharsis from the contradictions of actually lived socialism, satirical humor, and even political critique (Yurchak 1997, 2006; Boyer and Yurchak 2010).

Boyer and Yurchak (2010) have found institutional conditions that create hypernormalized discursive conditions in other contexts. They argue that late liberalism, which they use to describe contemporary Western states, produces its own repetition of language and stagnation of political viewpoints. They point to online news aggregators and American cable network punditry as examples of widespread recycling of political rhetoric. Without the direct dominance of the party-state in media outlets, the dominance of a few political interests and a limited number of major media corporations reduces the ability of citizens to access alternative viewpoints.

In these environments, the genres of satire and parody grow more salient as ways of coping with the absurdity of dominant discourses' inability to acknowledge or represent citizens' lived reality. In Russia Yurchak recognized the rise of *stiob*, a genre of ironic humor in which it is "often impossible to tell whether [such an act] is a form of sincere support or subtle ridicule, or both" (Boyer and Yurchak 2010, 181). Late liberalist America fosters *stiob*-like television news shows such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* and the fake newspaper *The Onion*. These mediums borrow the format and language of the politicians and media organizations that they mock. Ironic humor can provide catharsis for the contradictions and deceptions of contemporary life (Yurchak 1997) or offer the foundations for alternative political projects (Boyer and Yurchak 2010).

Satirical humor has emerged as a popular genre in China over the last several decades (Gong and Yang 2010). Certainly, the institutional conditions of the Chinese state and of Chinese media outlets differ from those of Russia or America at any historical juncture; however, similarities can be noted. First, the Chinese Communist Party has a central role in shaping official

Chinese media. Second, the rise of commercialism in China over the past several decades has placed Chinese society within global media and political trends, which has introduced the canned language of marketing and the tropes of foreign media outlets that are continuously suspicious of China.

In postsocialist China cultural conditions allow for satire directed both at the state and non-state media. Recently a new form of ironic humor in China called *egao*, translated perhaps best as “wicked fun,” has emerged and proliferated over online social forums. The most famous instance of *egao* is Hu Ge’s 2006 online video “The Bloody Case of the Steamed Bun” in which the high-budget and poorly reviewed Chinese film “The Promise” is re-edited to mimic a television crime program. The video parodied the clichés of commercial Chinese film and television. Media theorist Paula Voci (2010) argues that *egao* humor is well positioned in the current hegemonic conditions of China, wherein copyright laws restrict use of copyrighted video, online censorship is rampant, and the producers of mainstream media are widely perceived as working together closely with the Chinese government. Haomin Gong and Xi Yang have written that *egao* “plays with authority, deconstructs orthodox seriousness, and offers comic criticism as well as comic relief” (Gong and Yang 2010, 16). Along with the catharsis this humor brings is potential political criticism. The playful seriousness of *egao* has worried authorities. Shortly after “The Bloody Case” circulated on the Internet, communications authorities attempted to crack down on online humor, imposing new regulations for user registration and content (Barmé 2007).

All of the examples of *egao* I discuss below are explicitly labeled as such. The authors typically post a video, photos, or text and call on fellow message board users to add to the mirth. Lively discussions frequently occurred in which users would debate the quality, effectiveness, and relevance of the “wicked humor.” The methodology for this section consists of systematically

exploring instances of *egao* on the popular Tianya website during the Torch Relay period. I also explored other instances of the humor on other Chinese search websites such as Youku and Hecaitou. All of these websites were popular in 2008 and the posts considered had thousands of views and provoked lively discussions. Although enjoying a limited audience, *egao* reveals that many in China receive authoritative discourses with skepticism and resistance; a phenomenon that indicates the fragility of ideologically loaded mega-projects and the geographical understandings they attempt to bring about.

Some humor is more social than political. For instance, one video appropriating the Torch Relay includes some friends holding an impromptu torch run with a battery-operated light in a public square. The camera pans to follow the torchbearer, whose friends cheer him on as he runs in a small circle (Youku 2009). On another website actual torchbearers are shown striking funny poses both intentional and unintentional (Wangyi 2008). Rather than posting the serious and heroic representations of torchbearers that were portrayed in official media, posters revealed a sillier and more humanized Relay.

Other Torch Relay themed *egao* skewered the political clichés of hypernormalized discourse. While Chinese media confirmed the unanimous North Korean people's support of the Pyongyang relay as well as the relay event's historic success (Zhou 2008), a Chinese Internet user posted images of Pyongyang relay supporters whose stoic faces looked over the relay lane with little apparent joy. Commentators poked fun at the situation, appropriating Communist rhetoric to describe the forced public showing. Other posters suggested that the relay support was organized by the North Korean government (Caobian wangshi 2008), which is an ironic displacement of Western media criticism of Chinese relay supporters onto another Communist regime (Barmé 2009).

Egao was also directed at foreign media outlets. One Tianya user asked fellow users to post Photoshopped images of Paris Torch Relay human rights protests to reveal French hypocrisy. Users listed a variety of French territories that were taken by conquest and that have nativist movements. In one edited image, French protestors' banner of the Olympic rings as handcuffs was replaced with a "Free Corsica" sign. Another user was wary about this *egao* approach, writing:

I think that this is not a good idea. Posting the slogan '[Paris supports human rights all around the world], except in French annexed Corsica,' is like equating Corsica's position in France to Tibet's position in China. But there is an essential difference between them. Using slogans like this will lead people to abuse them [against China]. (Tianya.cn 2008b)

In this last case, humor is used to criticize foreign media on the one hand, and to open up discussion over political equivalences on the other. Indeed, the specter of the geo-body remains strong in this last example, resonating with the normative spaces of patriotic education. The Chinese Internet reveals a public interpretation of the Relay in excess, yet critically influenced by, Chinese state discourse. While some reaches of the Chinese Internet are fervently nationalistic, others are concerned with entertainment and gossip (Leibold 2010; 2011). So while the Internet can be an apolitical third place, it can also be a site of politically charged nationalism, or even both.

As the multiplicity of reactions to the Olympic Torch Relay has demonstrated, the potential of state or commercial discourses to impart an ideological project is compromised. Satirical humor can undermine the overly scripted discourses that structure mega-events in hypernormalized state and media environments. Yet even *egao* humor is not immune to a defensive popular nationalism can take uncontrollable and unpredictable forms.

CONCLUSION: MEGA-EVENTS, SATIRE, AND NATIONALISM

The Olympic Torch Relay was a mega-event that inscribed China on the world in a two ways: through media and popular reiterations of China's geopolitical struggles and through the domestic Torch Relay's design, which encompassed every appendage of the Chinese geo-body. Some segments of the Chinese public exceeded official media discourse that criticized the Torch's difficult international journey. Often writing and posting videos online, these passionate netizens worked from the discourse supplied by patriotic education to attack the foreign powers that have historically humiliated China. In addition to this nationalist support, other Chinese were critical of the dominant discourses and parodied the Olympic mega-event for the sake of fun or political commentary.

Using popular nationalism and satirical humor to look at mega-events allows scholars to better understand their potential political and cultural effects. While mega-events may appear to be useful ideological tools, their spectacular nature and geographical extent make them unwieldy and vulnerable for geopolitical and national projects. For organizers it is difficult to maintain "impression management" as multiple political interests vie for the media spotlight (Horne and Whannel 2010). This is of particular salience in an era in which the speed and ease of use of the Internet allow for nationalists, activists, and humorists to utilize mega-events for their own political and social purposes. Already the 2014 Sochi Olympics, which Russian political elites have framed for geopolitical purposes as giving "Russia the chance to demonstrate its greatness to the world" (Müller 2011, 2101), has become a salient site of contestation over Russia's imposition of discriminatory anti-gay laws.

Certainly, studies of mega-event design, promotion, and reception are profitable ways to reveal the hopes of the governments and organizations that have crafted the events, the media organizations that report on them, and the publics that that creatively interpret their meanings.

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CAPTIONS

FIG. 1 - The five *fuwa* or Olympic Bears. (Photograph by the author, October 2012)

FIG. 2 - The route of the domestic torch relay, which brought the torch to every province. Note that Taiwan still appears on the map despite not having a relay city. This map is based on an image circulated by Xinhua News. (Map by Matt Zebrowski)

FIG. 3 - Jordanian climber Mostafa Salameh with a Tibetan flag on top of Mt. Everest. (Reproduced courtesy of photographer, Mostafa Salameh, May 2008)

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