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China Week on the BBC: The Media Making Knowledge and Writing History

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Abstract: In March of 2005, the British Broadcasting Corporation ran a special week of programming about China in its news and current affairs services on television and radio called “China Week”. This paper argues that the BBC was engaged in a specific task of producing knowledge about China in which a traditional commitment to media objectivity conflicted with a self-conscious interpretation of China for a British audience. The paper suggests that in this ambiguity was a failure to understand the way the BBC was writing a Chinese history or to acknowledge the ideological implications of such a task. [China Media Research. 2007; 3(1):17-25].

Keywords: BBC; China Week

Between March 7 and 13, 2005, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) held a “China Week”, a special week of programming about China, on television, radio and the Internet. *China Week* was made up of reports on China in newscasts and current affairs, screenings of documentaries, and live programming on television and radio from Chinese cities. Over sixty journalists traveled to China for the week, delivering dozens of hours of programming with the purpose of “bringing the enormous changes happening in China” to the attention of the British people.ⁱ *China Week* evolved from a suggestion within the BBC World Service, on the periphery of the BBC’s structure, into a major institutional undertaking across all the BBC’s broadcast services.ⁱⁱ The different aspects of the BBC participated in their different ways in the *Week* so that from the World Service, *China Week* found its way through domestic radio and television to features on the BBC’s central flagship news programs, the *6 O’clock News*, and late-evening current affairs program *Newsnight*.

The process by which the *Week* was put together was *ad hoc* and largely uncoordinated.ⁱⁱⁱ As it propagated through the different sections of the BBC, the subject of China was incorporated into a range of programming styles and formats, from live coverage on radio, extended panel discussions on radio and television, and conventional news and current affairs reportage. The programming mostly followed the conventions of broadcasting. At the “entertainment” end, for example on Radio Five Live, the BBC’s talk radio network, there were live “vox pops” and interviews, and human-interest stories. At the “serious” end, for example on the *Newsnight* evening current affairs program, there were crafted reports with narratives of argumentation and tight structures, informed by “expert” opinion and journalists in the field. Despite the range of broadcasting formats and styles, *China Week* became a remarkably coherent and

structured discourse of China. It tracked through five key identifiable themes: China’s relationship to the UK, its economic boom, democracy, the environment, and minorities. It approached each of them with the conventional “critical” style of media investigation, creating a drama out of the inherent social and political tensions of China’s economic boom, social changes, and undemocratic government.

Although the coverage coincided with the Third Session of the 10th National People’s Congress in Beijing, the only significant China story of the week was the passing of the anti-succession law by the National People’s Congress, which escalated China-Taiwan tension. Therefore, within its place in the BBC’s news programming of that week, *China Week* had the significant distinction in that it was not, strictly speaking, news. Instead, *China Week* did much more than simply report specific events in China as part of the normal news production cycle. It offered a self-conscious commentary on China’s importance to the UK and to the world in a general sense: “Isn’t it time you got to know the world’s fastest growing superpower?” ran one of the promotional clips. Therefore, running through the specific themes was a broader understanding of China in terms of temporality - the “rise” of China - and through that a kind of dialectical projection of the UK’s social, political and economic life in relation to this new global power. The terms of that “importance” were highly structured and contingent, and in the programming overall, and indeed in the opening of the tag line, “Isn’t it time”, was a highly structured temporality to a discourse of “China”.

Objectivity and knowledge

The location of *China Week* within the rhetorical styles of conventional broadcasting and news reporting without actually being news exposes the discursive structure of those styles very neatly. It expresses a powerful effect of misrecognition (Bourdieu, 1991) by

the BBC in which *China Week* was offered as a deliberate and self-conscious interpretive and pedagogical approach to China while presenting its broadcasts *as if* they functioned on the conventional bases of the notions of objectivity and neutrality which inform broadcasting and news reporting. *China Week*, therefore, invoked an ambiguous form of broadcasting, with the conventions of journalistic objectivity coming up against a self-conscious narration of a discourse of “China”.

Objectivity is as established an orthodoxy in the media as it is a dominant theme of critique in media studies. The self-professed purpose of journalism is to report “facts”, on the assumption that they can be understood as objective truths and conveyed with disinterest on the part of the journalist or broadcaster (Humphrys, 2005), what Gaye Tuchman described in the early 1970s as the “strategic ritual” of objectivity (Tuchman, 1972). The history of the journalistic notion of objectivity has been thoroughly detailed in media studies (see Allen, 1999) and there are also parallels with the development of the notion of objectivity in the social sciences. Although contemporary news reporting may often self-consciously not heed the ideal of objectivity, the ideal itself remains a powerful legitimizing regime over the work of the media.

In the case of *China Week*, the BBC’s aim was to inform the British public as to the nature of China: “what life in China in 2005 is really like” (*Asia Today*, BBC News 24, 10 March, 2005). The BBC’s reports and broadcasts were all constructed on the basis of the powerful credibility the BBC holds as a global broadcaster as a producer of authoritative, informed, objective and balanced news and broadcasting. In media and television studies, the critique of objectivity has rested on the notion of ideology, so that far from delivering objective truth, the media’s representation of events and subjects is understood as expressing particular ideologies through bias and omission (see Budner S., and Krauss, E. S., 1995). News reporting is criticized for expressing the interests of power, especially around social categories such as class, race, gender and the state and corporate power rather than upholding its avowed ideals. Early forms of critical and Marxist-inflected television studies such as that of the Glasgow Media Group exemplify this approach (Glasgow Media Group, 1976). This kind of work unpacks the relationship between the content and rhetorical conventions of news presentations so as to denaturalize them, showing how objectivity is merely a stylistic device, an authoritative, neutral presenting style for the reporting of events which effaces editorial political choices and biases, presenting news information *as if* the television production and editorial process was not introducing a wide range of ideological distortions.

Following media studies, needless to say the BBC’s presentation of China is open to a wide-ranging possible critique of its content and rhetoric. The non-news news of *China Week* was redolent with strong editorial decisions which delivered a proscribed range of themes and ideas about China through particular emphases or omissions, all of which showed China in a specific way. *China Week* might also be open to criticism for its occasional deployment of stereotypes and clichés about China and Chinese people. Yet the traditional media studies critique of news reporting is predicated on the assumption that an objective idealized truth is in fact possible. This may be a less significant issue when, in the example of the Glasgow Media Group work the critical goal is necessarily also a political one, but in the context of broadcasting about China, this issue is more germane. A critique of *China Week* which aimed to show how it was ideologically biased assumes that there is a single truthful or correct understanding of “China” against which the BBC’s could be measured. This critique, therefore, makes a counter-appeal to a totalizing knowledge of the “true” nature of China, from which the BBC would be accused of deviating with inaccuracies and omissions.

Rather than set up completing claims to know the “real” China in a critical response to *China Week*, the *Week* can be simply described on the basis of its claim on knowledge of China. At the level of epistemology, rather than rhetorical style, objectivity is a more fundamental feature of media reporting, becoming, in this broader sense, positivism, or an understanding of language which assumes the possibility of producing empirical knowledge of social categories which is independent of the structuring effect of the language that is used to express that knowledge (Shapiro, 1981). *China Week* was informed by the assumption that “China” is a bounded and totalizable reality, a singular social object which can be accurately reported, described and analyzed on the basis of a clear distinction between China as a social object and the media coverage that is producing an understanding of what China is.

Therefore, out of contemporary China’s pluralities and untotizable realities, the BBC was producing its own coherent version of China. It was elaborated like those of academia or politics, with styles and registers which produced legitimate knowledge - knowledge that counts as knowledge - through specific epistemological mechanisms. It was structured in terms of temporality and had valorized themes. *China Week* shows how the BBC was engaged in an act to produce China as a discourse, the BBC’s China.

The breadth of *China Week* across the BBC was one of its unusual and defining features, giving its discursive production a scale not apparent in the more normal discontinuous individual news reports. It

became, deliberately or otherwise, an institutional undertaking which produced different aspects of the BBC's China across the different networks, taking on a multiplicity of legitimizing mechanisms. The networks and stations were operating within their briefs to produce different kinds of knowledge, but which together offered the possibility of an encompassing knowledge.

The discursive production of China by *China Week* began with the introductions to the segments. In the context of the non-news news characteristic of the *Week*, these functioned as an explicit interpretive layer, constructing a delimited set of problematics and themes from which the British public could "know", and know that it knew, China. On the *6 O'clock News*, the newsreader said:

All this week, the BBC has been taking a closer look at China. It's the world's fastest growing economy and this year will overtake Britain. But economic liberation has not yet been followed by political freedom. In the first of a series of special reports for the 6 O'clock News... (BBC1 *6 O'clock News*, 8 March 2005).

This week we've reported on how much China has changed in recent years, but there's been little reform in one area - religion. Today, religious minorities are still closely controlled. (BBC1 *6 O'clock News*, 10 March 2005).

Like the other aspects of *China Week*, the introductions are part of the rhetorical strategies which began the process of legitimizing the BBC's authorial voice. They were mediating between an imagined "British public", which was assumed, possibly correctly, to be largely ignorant about China,^{iv} and the reportage segments on television and radio.

After the introductions, the different networks of the BBC produced their distinct ways of knowing China. Analogies can be drawn between the kinds of coverage across the BBC and the different approaches possible from within academic knowledge of China. One can map *China Week* across academic models: Radio Five Live was doing ethnography or anthropology, taking in local, "ordinary" experiences; similarly on TV, BBC News 24 and BBC Breakfast were doing live crosses and talking to people in the street. This kind of knowledge was legitimized, like anthropology, by claims on an authentic, subjective Chinese experience - the personal voices of real Chinese people - as the site at which we can know China. In contrast, the Radio 4 spoken word network, the evening television news programs and the nightly *Newsnight* current affairs program, and some of the World Service were doing political science, sociology or policy analysis - broader

studies of political and social processes in China. Instead of the personal and subjective, this was the systematizing effect of abstract analyses, outlining themes and offering explanatory models from which it could be claimed to know China. The interviews and "vox-pops" provide "data" which offers representative samples of Chinese lives, and the analysis and in-depth constructed reports function as "theory" to make sense of the "data". Radio Five Live spent a morning in a small town called Huiwu south of Chongqing, visiting a school and presenting descriptive knowledge:

In the background you can probably hear some children, they're primary school children, exercising in what is their only area to exercise, a sort of rather scruffy playground ... it's ... it's pretty poor. I am looking at a three story building, it's got the sort of white cement on the outside which is rough and in some places falling off..." (Radio Five Live, 11 March, 2005). BBC News 24 crossed live to Shanghai where the journalist interviewed a representative example of urban China:

[Journalist] Cheng Yun, who's 25, and she works for L'Oreal, the cosmetics giant. Cheng Yun, what's it like to live in this city? [Interviewee] Oh, it's very nice, I like [it] here, it's a very dynamic city, and a lot of opportunities. ... [Journalist] And you've come down here to do a bit of shopping here this evening. [Interviewee] Yes! (BBC News 24, 7 March, 2005).

Although these "vox-pops" might have been analogous to ethnographic knowledge, the epistemologies of electronic news are quite specific and distinctive from academic knowledge. A social scientist might survey a large number of people or analyze statistics to produce knowledge while surveys or qualitative research with a single subject would not count or be legitimate. For journalism, a single interviewee is legitimate, and this rests on both the assumption that they are representative of a broader objective social reality "China's rural poor", or "urban Chinese youth", for example, and also that they themselves can offer analysis of that social reality (Allen, 1999, pp. 36-39). This is an improvisational epistemological mechanism in which the journalist uses his or her judgment, a "nose" for news, with which to assess the assumed representativeness of an interviewee.

For *Newsnight*, the *6 O'clock News*, and some of the segments on BBC News 24 and on radio, their contribution to *China Week* was extended analytical reports on topics including politics, the environment, the economy, human rights and daily life. In contrast to the improvisational and subjective "data" of the live coverage, these reports were detailed and structured with lines of argumentation:

[Journalist] Over the past two decades, China has put economic growth above all else, and with two hundred million Chinese still living on less than a dollar a day, relieving poverty remains vital. Coal offers the way out. As the demand for power grows, for the time being this means one thing, more emissions of climate changing gasses. (BBC2, *Newsnight*, 8 March 2005).

These kinds of reports also use the convention of the “expert”, an academic or a government official for example, whose analysis is legitimized by the institutions of academia or by political power:

[Journalist] But China’s international reputation is now a mixed affair. [Expert interviewee 1] China is a partner in the fight against global international terrorism, and I think that’s won China some point in America and around the world ... [Journalist] When it comes to proliferation, there is one area, North Korea, where China has made itself essential ... [Expert interviewee 2] They have absolutely no desire to see a nuclear North Korea. (BBC News 24, 9 March, 2005).

Typically, news reporting offers a combination of the journalist’s analytic voice, perhaps with the legitimizing addition of the expert, and the subjective interviewee. On the *Newsnight* program under the subject of democracy:

[Journalist] This week, China announced it’s achieved ninety-nine percent democracy. In Tianjin, the mayor is trying to breath life into consultative bodies that used to simply rubber-stamp party decisions. ... [Interview with street vendor, journalist] Do you think politicians in this city actually listen when people like you ask them things? [Interviewee] You mean the leaders? I feel from my point of view it’s not likely, because we’re not important, we’re too small and too far way from people with their social status.” (BBC2, *Newsnight*, 9 March, 2005).

In one example, knowledge of China was produced self-reflexively, by asking how much British people knew about China. The lighter magazine style of the *Breakfast* television program meant it self-reflexively includes the viewer, an imagined “ordinary” member of the British public, into its discursive production of China:

[Host] It produces half of the world’s cameras, a quarter of its washing machines, and ninety percent of the world’s toys. We’re talking about China’s

economy which is expanding all the time. ... [Interviewee] ‘This definitely says Made in China ... [Journalist] Jo, we’ve looked around your house, are you surprised by the number of products that are made in China?’” (BBC1, *Breakfast*, 8 March 2005).

For television, unlike radio, or indeed academic knowledge, visuality is the basis of the legitimacy of its knowledge. In *China Week*, visuality functioned as an analogue of its whole epistemology. Television coverage showed images of Chinese lives in which their visual presentation produced the effect of unmediated objective knowledge and effaced the meditative processes of television production. As Stein has argued in the context of the US current affairs program *60 Minutes*, following from Barthes’ critique of the news photograph, the visual representation of China in *China Week* is a privileged form of knowledge, unarguable as the “real China”. When we see something on television, we really know that we know it. The visual “in this medium professes to be a ‘mechanical analogue of reality.’ ... [its] denotative status and the completeness of its analogy, ‘in short its ‘objectivity’,’ lends itself to the naturalized state of ideological common-sense” (Stein, 2001, p.251). The power of the image is such that it functions to produce China as an objective reality, powerful enough to overwhelm our awareness of the wholly constructed nature of the image by the television production processes.

An example of the power of the visual in *China Week* was a report on the Three Gorges Dam, under the theme “Environment”. A long shot took in the enormous scale of the Three Gorges Dam project, showing the viewer the reality of China’s Promethean development and, in the context of the report, the costs to the environment. Then, however, the journalist intervenes, shown in a shot standing on top of a platform so as to survey the construction project. he adopts a literal privileged position from which to “know” China, and mediate between the “real” China of the image and the British viewer. From this position, the journalist explains the significance of the Three Gorges project:

When this dam is finished, it will be by some margin, the world’s largest hydroelectric power station ... for the Chinese government, that’s obviously very good news, that will be cheap, clean electricity for China’s surging economy. But there is another side to the story of this dam, and that is its immense cost...” (BBC1 *6 O’clock News*, 9 March, 2005).

Television’s visuality appeals with unique power to the possibility of unmediated objectivity, in contrast to

radio which by definition makes explicit the meditative effects of the reporter on the reality he or she is reporting. Radio in this way demands both creative imagination on the part of the listener to “picture”, for example, the impoverished Huiwu School and a recognition of the interpretive role of the aural radio medium. In denoting the demand of the listener that he or she “picture” China’s reality, radio makes explicit the meditative and constructive mechanisms which television works equally explicitly to conceal.

Interpretation

As noted above, the BBC appeared to “misrecognize” its own participation in China’s discursive production, so that it offered a self-conscious interpretation of China for the British public while simultaneously deploying the media’s conventional rhetorical effects of objectivity. This epistemological confusion suggests a failure by the BBC to self-reflexively understand the nature of its self-ascribed institutional task in *China Week*. It wished to help the British public “know the world’s fastest growing superpower”, but it did not understand its own role in producing “China” as a bounded and structured body of knowledge. It self-consciously interpreted China through several layers of mediation, but did not appear to recognize the operation of its own interpretive effects.

In this way, *China Week* was not a creative and sustained intellectual act. Instead, the BBC unreflectively deployed an appropriated array of valorized themes and ideas with which “China” was described, explained, and understood. It created these as an improvised and porous discourse functioning as just a part of the broad Western discourse of China. *China Week* was an assemblage or summation of a range of ideas of China, packaged into radio and television reportage.

The improvised nature of *China Week* was evidenced in its unmindful retelling of the long engagement of the West with China. This engagement could be found in references made by *China Week* to earlier representational tropes. One of the most febrile is the apocryphal phrase of Napoleon’s “Beware the sleeping dragon for when she awakes she will shake the world”. While Napoleon never actually made any reference to a waking dragon (Fitzgerald, 1996, pp. 62-3), it has become one of the longest-standing references to a temporalized China, expressing China’s modernity and modernization around the notion of its emergence from an ahistorical past.

In *China Week*, there were only two scripted references to China as a waking dragon, one which opened the entire week of broadcasting on the *Breakfast* television program and another during the news cycle on the 24 hour digital news channel BBC News 24, into which *China Week* reports were inserted at regular

intervals. However, if this cliché has faded, the BBC introduced a new phrase to describe China, “the world’s fastest growing economy” which opened almost every segment, report and program like a mantra. This phrase became the primary rhetorical device for *China Week* to legitimize China as a place which should most interest and concern the British public. For the BBC, China’s defining and important characteristic is its economy and its current high rate of economic growth, rather than, as a hypothetical contrast, its ancient and magnificent civilization. That this specific measurement of global power - annual rates of economic growth - should define the meaning of China for the BBC is an expression of its implication in the global liberal capitalist narratives in which economic statistics have become the key structuring principle for global meaning.

China Week also echoed the 19th and early 20th century tropes of China of the “Mysterious East” and “Yellow Peril”. Introducing *China Week* on Radio Five Live, the presenter said: “China has emerged as the new global superpower with the world’s fastest growing economy, but what do we know about this country?” (BBC Five Live, 7 March 2005) The answer is, of course, perhaps more than any other non-western country in the world. China is after all its own field of scholarship. Similarly with current affairs program *Newsnight* a scripted introduction ran as follows: “This question of how the world’s fastest growing economy can simultaneously be the world’s biggest Communist state is one of the great mysteries about China.” (BBC2, *Newsnight*, 9 March, 2005). China is politically authoritarian and economically liberal, of which one can find any number of examples, especially in East Asia through the 20th century. The “mystery” is not a general politico-economic analytical problem, but “China” itself. That mystery was evoked in the rhetorical style of the presentation, with the presenter’s tone of voice functioning as a metaphorical gazing to the distant horizons of the Far East.

BBC *China Week* also referred to more recent meanings for China. In the introductions to some of the television segments the BBC claimed it had particular access to China:

In a country balancing its Communist ideals against the desire to throw open its borders to foreign investment ... the BBC has been given unprecedented access but free broadcasting on many issues is still restricted. (BBC News 24, 7 March 2005).

The notion of “unprecedented access” references Maoist China, when traveling to and moving around China was, indeed, much more difficult than it is today, and it invokes a special claim on knowledge of China as a legitimizing strategy for the BBC’s China discourse.

In contrast to these traditional orientalist notions of China, *China Week* also made references to the Chinese diaspora. During the *Breakfast* program, in a report on the Chinese community in the northern city of Manchester, a journalist did a live broadcast from a large Chinese grocery supplier:

Good morning everyone from Manchester. We're here as part of the BBC's *China Week*, looking at the business links between the UK, and between the north west, and China. ... The store that we're in ... is a cash-and-carry store that supplies Chinese restaurants ... and you've got anything you could ever want ... and of course the ubiquitous fortune cookies. (BBC 1, *Breakfast*, 8 March, 2005).

Pointing out the fortune cookies acknowledges the overseas Chinese migrant, mainly Cantonese, communities in the UK. This is an historically-specific meaning for China from the 19th and 20th centuries, when Chinese migrants settled in the UK and established Chinatowns and businesses in food and services. This is a very different understanding of China from that of the "People's Republic of China" and decades older than the notion of "the world's fastest growing superpower". These references to the many meanings for China point to the *ad hoc* nature of *China Week*. They were not offered as part of a deliberate exposition of the history of the West's engagement with China or Chinese people, but were included as the unreflective reproduction of discourses, and perhaps even stereotypes.

However, within this process of discursive reproduction, the BBC did present a dominant meaning for China, and that was the notion of "transformation". Almost every report was prefaced and structured around the idea of China making some kind of social, civilizational and, of course, economic leap from one state to another.^v

Western ideas of transformation in Asia are long-established. The model is the West's reading of Japan after the Meiji Restoration and the period between 1868 and Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 (Bourne, 1916). Notions of East Asian transformation were renewed in the post-war period with Taiwan and South Korea, the so-called "Little Dragons" (Vogel, 1991). The over-determining narrative is modernization and, more fundamentally, modernity, and as with these earlier expressions of Asian modernity, the transformation narrative of *China Week* became an uncritical telling of a story of China's transition to a "modern" society. This in turn reproduced a range of unstated assumptions about the "unmodern" point of origin in China's past from which such a transformation

could begin, and the features and styles by which we could recognize that this is a "new China".

The markers of transformation for such an uncritical narrative in *China Week* were delimited. The unmodern was broadly represented by China's rural poor and the modern by the urban rich. *China Week* temporalized the relationship between the two so as to present urbanization as a feature of an "emergence" or "rise" of China. It used a doubled structure in a number of its reports to show this transition: the poverty of rural life was contrasted with a modern urban life in Beijing and especially Shanghai:

[video of rural village, pig being prepared for slaughter] The way things are done here hasn't changed for centuries. The man of the house should be in charge, but Mrs. Xiang's had to hire in some help. Her son is a student at college. Killing pigs is not his business. And her husband's far from home, earning money to pay for the university fees. ... [video of modern urban hair salon] ... Eight hundred miles away in Shanghai, Gaohui is giving herself a very different kind of treat, a little pampering at the hairdressers. (BBC News 24, 9 March 2005).

Often, though, the transformation narrative was presented with start and end points which were implicit rather than stated in such an obvious way. When the presenter said "but economic liberation has not yet been followed by political freedom", a received set of suppositions about the nature of social progress was put in place: China's transformation is indicated by the creation of particular kind of free-market liberal economic regime, and modern China starts with the creation of this regime. Then, the transformation of its economy sets in place other necessary developments, in particular political and social freedom, leading China theoretically toward an imagined liberal democratic future (see Huntington, 1991, Fukuyama, 1992). This narrative leaves assumed the point when China's path to modernity, or industrialization began, and where it is going:

[Journalist] "Well, we used to have bicycles, now we have mopeds, hopefully we'll soon have cars," he said. China's following a well-trodden path. Korea, Japan and others have industrialized rapidly, and all the evidence is that if China's come a long way, it can still go a lot further. (BBC News 24, 12 March 2005).

In *China Week*, little of this was made explicit, and as noted above, these issues of how to understand China were not self-reflexively included in the broadcasts. Rather than interrogate what makes China look "new",

China's modernity was identified and presented in a received form recognizable to both the British audience and the BBC. It was envisioned most strongly by a familiar consumer culture, urbanization and modern architecture, signified by Chinese people participating in China's consumer boom, for example in modern houses, shopping malls, cars and roads, and again and again with the illuminated vista of the Lujiazui financial district of the Pudong New Area in Shanghai.

These recognizable signs of the "new China" established reference points with which Chinese history and futures could be known by a British audience, and through which a British audience could also know itself. If China is transforming, then Britain is transformed, at the end of this imagined future for China, waiting for China to catch up, or even overtake the UK. The structured nature of this version of China's path to modernity overshadowed other aspects of China's modernization, ones less recognizable to the BBC and to a British audience. In particular, with notable exceptions such as the story on the Three Gorges Dam project, state-sponsored modernization was not a feature of *China Week*, largely excluding the potent state and Party visions for China's future around nationalist ideology, the military, infrastructure or the space program. China's transformation in *China Week* was generally showing the emergence of the individuated urban consumer as the sign of the arrival of this "new China":

[Journalist] I am walking along one of Shanghai's most fashionable shopping streets, Huahai Rd in the centre of the city and it is lined with exactly the same trade names that you would see in any major Western city. There's a Pierre Cardin, Adidas, Mango, across the road, Episode, Armani, they're all here, and they're all catering to the new rich of Shanghai (BBC Radio 4, *The World Today*, 9 March, 2005).

More fundamental than these elisions, the narrative of transformation is redolent with politics and the politics of history-writing. By structuring their knowledge of China in terms of transformation, the BBC was actually engaged in the practice of writing Chinese history itself. The transformation of the "New China" involves trajectories with an imagined historical starting point, and imagined end-points, which introduces effacements and erasures into its historical narratives.

For *China Week*, the starting point for China's transformation into "the world's fastest growing economy" was very clearly 1978 and the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee, when the Chinese Communist Party initiated "reform": the Open Door policy, economic liberalization, and the continued

dismantling of collectivized (though not state-owned) agriculture and industry. In terms of the politics of history-writing, if China "began" its transformation in 1978 then this serves to attenuate and marginalize what came before, in this case Maoism. By starting the history of the new China in 1978, Maoist China becomes merely a point of origin, a singular moment with no history of its own and, in particular, no continuity with the China of the 1930s and 1940s and the contemporary China of the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. By structuring it around a narrative of transformation based on economic growth, the version of Chinese history of *China Week* erased Maoism from Chinese history.

In one of the live crosses to Shanghai across from the Pudong New Area, this erasure was clearly expressed:

[Journalist] Hello and welcome to Shanghai, and I am on the Bund, Shanghai's famous waterfront ... Take a look over there, that skyline seventy years ago the most famous in Asia. In those days Shanghai was known as the Paris of the East, and now many people hope that those glory days are coming back again. You look over the river [pan to Pudong New Area] and you see some of the reasons why. Ten years ago that was marshland ... (BBC News 24, 7 March 2005).

In this introduction was a history of China in which Mao and Maoist Communism became a void, an absent presence, around which Shanghai had deviated away from its "natural" status of "glory".

It is notable that the narrative of transformation articulated by much of the reportage of *China Week* was the use of extreme contrasts - extreme poverty, the people "left behind", the "have-nots" in contrast to the urban rich in the major cities. This attenuated the possibility of invoking the idea of "ordinary Chinese", people neither especially rich nor poor and people whose lives express neither the timelessness of the peasant nor the emergence from 1978 of the rich consumer, but rather greater continuity in their lives over the last few decades that the notion of transformation would tend to acknowledge. Similarly with the attenuation of the state and the Party from *China Week*, which while still controlling most of the economy and being an active presence in Chinese lives, does not fit within the transformation narrative and a history of China that starts in 1978.

If the BBC has written a history of China that starts in 1978, then the question becomes what are the implications of a such a specific and politicized history. The danger for the BBC is that in writing Chinese history in this way, and being apparently unaware of the implications of its own history-writing, or even that it

was engaged in such a task, it finds itself aligned with a common story about China being told by government and business that privileges economic development and commercial opportunities and attenuates the both the continuing presence of the Communist state, and the complexity and continuities of China's social experience as a narrative of change over the whole post-imperial period. Importantly, this is a version of China's story that the Chinese government itself is also telling, as it distances itself from Maoism and encourages China's consumer economy, while continuing to secure its position of political authority.

The history of China which the BBC was reproducing was told during *China Week* itself by a representative of the British business community on a panel discussion program on Radio 4:

[Program guest] I think we have to get the big picture here. China's economic miracle over the last twenty five years in an event of historical proportions. Four hundred, five hundred million people have been brought out of poverty over that period. We are looking at rates of growth going forward of eight, nine percent in the next ten years. No other developing country is looking at that future at the moment. All these problems, the banking sector, maybe a small housing price bubble in Shanghai, which of course is only one city among hundreds of cities, these problems are manageable if growth keeps going, even the environmental problems, we know ... once a certain level of per capita income is achieved these start to be solved much more quickly. It's a question of industrialization which China is going through right at the moment. (BBC Radio 4, *The World Today*, 11 March 2005).

In understanding the implementation of economic reform by the Chinese Communist Party as a "miracle" and "an event of historical proportions", a specific set of policies are read as China's transition to modernity starting twenty-five years ago. The narrative deprecates China's previous experiences of modernity and the continuities across the 20th century of both its economic development and especially its politics. Furthermore, it imagines a distinctly old-fashioned, and perhaps reassuring, Western modernist vision of limitless progress through modernization, in which all of China's problems will be solved by capitalist industrialization. The BBC was deeply engaged with this way of understanding China and has reproduced it very thoroughly in *China Week*.

However, it did develop one form of extremely important critical response to this overdetermining narrative, which was the emphasis on democracy, and to a lesser extent, human rights. This theme is not a

critique of the overall narrative of transformation and how it writes and re-writes China's past and future. Indeed, democracy is embedded into that narrative itself via development studies and political science: with the transformation to a liberal economic regime should come the "natural" progression to liberal democracy (Huntington, 1991). But democracy and human rights was the one issue for the *China Week* which stood between its coverage and the overheated depolitical modernist fantasy of China's progress offered by government and business.

The live panel discussion television program *Question Time* during *China Week* was centred on the theme of democracy and political freedom, and became a series of appeals to political reform to match economic development. The counter-argument from Chinese government representatives on the panel was the same appeal to the narrative of economic development made by the foreign business person quoted above. On Hong Kong's political future:

[Chinese government representative] I think whether you have the Chief Executive Officer selected through various kinds of modalities, the most important thing we have to keep in mind is the prosperity and the welfare of the people there ...

[panelist] What I find puzzling is this the notion that stability and prosperity are somehow threatened by democracy ...

[Chinese government representative] Look at all this so-called universal suffrage and general elections, sometimes the turn-out is less than fifty percent ... in many countries you want the chance to give him a choice whether you have the right to vote or the right to have a job ... (BBC 1, *Question Time*, 10 March 2005).

Human rights advocates were also given a voice in the *China Week* news reports:

[Journalist] Has the human rights situation improved on the ground for people in China?

[Interviewee] Well, I think in terms of the current Chinese leadership clearly the Chinese government now does seem to be taking a more positive stance on human rights ... the basic problem is that these fine words are really being implemented on the ground and the result is that grass-roots activists on the ground have been detained or imprisoned under exactly the same charges ... as from five, ten, maybe fifteen years ago. (BBC News 24, *Asia Today*, 11 March 2005).

The theme of human rights and democracy functioned as a constant block to the runaway narrative of transformation, such as that expressed by the British

businessperson. Yet, as noted above, it was not a critical interrogation of China as a discourse, but an immanent part of that same transformation narrative which the BBC was itself promoting as the way to “know” China. The emphasis on democracy and human rights was questioning China’s fulfillment of the trajectory of liberal capitalist development which the BBC constructed as the basis of *China Week*. Therefore, while this theme was important and commendable, it still operated within the BBC’s unreflective set of assumptions about China’s history and future.

In the context of the whole of *China Week*, the democracy and human rights theme was the best that could be hoped for to offer a challenge to the current period of enthusiasm for the “historical proportions” of Chinese development. *China Week* was a laudable undertaking, realized with technically high-quality reportage and broadcasting, and serving to place China in the consciousness of the British media audience. Yet, it was delivered without any apparent self-awareness of the BBC’s role as a producer of knowledge. The BBC was interpreting the Chinese experience and constructing specific narratives of Chinese history with significant political implications for how China is understood, but without a self-conscious awareness that interpretation and history-writing were the bases of their enterprise. As a result, in the end, *China Week* rehearsed well-established Western narratives of China and failed to offer new insights into what China means to the UK.

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ⁱ This information was taken from discussion held during a seminar conducted by the author on *China Week* attended by representatives of the BBC, held on May 19, 2005.

ⁱⁱ *ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid.*

^{iv} Based on comments by BBC representatives at the *China Week* seminar.

^v see Fitzgerald, J. (1996) *Awakening China* for a detailed exposition of the history of the transformation trope from the 19th century to the early 20th century.