The World in China's Imagination: An Analysis of CCTV News

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One inconvenient theme that emerged constantly, but which never gained the attention of the Faculty International Development Seminar discussions, is the theme of American imperialism. Who can forget when the Nanjing guide spoke eloquently about why the United States should not prefix its references to other countries with adjectives—such as communist China, capitalist China, socialist China—or the world will start calling the U.S. "imperialist America"? I also had the chance to speak to hairdressers and taxi drivers, who unequivocally argued that the U.S. was imperialistic in its occupation of Iraq. A taxi driver told me that while taxi drivers didn't dare to outwardly protest against the U.S. because they feared the wrath of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), they did what they could by boycotting riders at the American embassy.

Even though I was aware of the U.S.'s lack of popularity overseas (e.g., in Japan, 80% of public opinion was against intervention in Iraq), it was still surprising to encounter it in its full breadth and depth, and to watch how this anti-Americanism coexists comfortably with the desire for and pursuit of American goods like McDonalds and DKNY. What is the source of such anti-American sentiment? Does it reflect the images presented in the Chinese media, or does it exist *in spite of* government and media discourses? What is the image of America (and the world) in the Chinese imagination, as reflected in the media and everyday talk?

Besides investigating the similarity/differences between media and popular discourse in China, given the comparative nature of the Seminar, this essay will also offer tangential insights into U.S. hegemony, especially into whether the U.S. version of reality is echoed in Chinese media and whether people outside of the U.S. live in the same symbolic universe. Pulling together these three fields—U.S. discourse, Chinese media discourse, and Chinese popular discourse—will not be easy. To accomplish this, I will foreground the description of Chinese media discourse and keep the comparison with the other two fields tacit until the conclusion, when the relationship between the three fields will be explicated. Readers should note that my observations about American discourse stem from analysis of CNN. For the last three years, I have taught a comparative news course (CNN and al-Jazeera) at Macalester College and have supervised many student projects focusing on news coverage of Middle East crises.

This essay complements the pre-departure presentation I made in April 2006 about "China in the American Imagination." In that presentation, I described the images of China that pervade American imagination and academia, and I criticized the accuracy and value of these images, arguing that they are highly selective, ignore contradictory images, and serve political ends.[1]

I. Analyzing CCTV News

During the independent study period (1–7 June 2006), I followed the Chinese and English versions of CCTV news closely, taking detailed notes of the types of stories that made the news and how they were covered. Originally, the purpose of following news in both languages was to examine whether there was a difference between them, given that they were oriented to different (Chinese versus non-Chinese) audiences. Since I found little difference between them (other than a greater focus on local stories in the Chinese news), I will use the term "CCTV news" generally to refer to news in both languages.

To analyze the "world" in the Chinese imagination, I will examine categories that are used to describe the world and the narratives for linking these categories into coherent stories. Narratives are usually indicated by the use of descriptive words (e.g., adjectives like good, evil, militant), contextual facts (e.g., whether war is explained by terrorism, poverty, inequality), transitivity (e.g., who has agency and who

is reacting to factors beyond control), and by the types of sources that are given voice.

Given that the stories, sources, and the (power to modify) terminology differ dramatically for stories about China, its sphere of influence, and the rest of the world, I will comment briefly on the first two before focusing on CCTV's coverage of international events.

II. Events in China and the Chinese World

Domestic news tends to emphasize China's progress in scientific and technological research. What is interesting is how, even in domestic stories about environmental week, CCTV is keen to emphasize how China's progress in science is mediated by environmental concerns, unlike the U.S., whose refusal to endorse the Kyoto Agreement was emphasized in CCTV's *domestic* news coverage.

For a supposedly socialist country, the traces of socialist discourse are extremely superficial (e.g., vocabulary words like "communiqué"). A key feature of socialist—or even simply social as opposed to liberal—ideology is the framing of problems and solutions as public and social, rather than private and personal. Despite the huge number of peasants' and workers' protests in China, the only labor issue covered was in the international news section and on the topic of a Korean trade union. When social problems are covered, they tend to be explained personally rather than socially. Crime, for example, is explained by bad morals rather than poverty. When an engineer died from excessive overwork in Shenzhen, no blame was put on company policies and the only information deemed relevant was a doctor's warning to workers not to ignore health for career (3 June 2006). Even in non-news programs, where more weight might be given to social trends, "social" explanations are mediated through the individual. For instance, the problem of cheating on China's national exams was attributed to social pressure on single children to succeed, which is less a criticism of stratification than a criticism of the individuals' psychological *perceptions* of social expectations.

A quick examination of adjectival phrases in CCTV news suggests that they are used only in domestic news and only in relation to the CCP and its policy toward Taiwan. This differs from CNN, where such phrases are used only in international news and usually to describe enemies of the U.S. government. The use of such phrases is generally considered a clear sign of bad journalism since adjectives require the

use of judgment, unless they are part of a text that is being cited. In CCTV's case (e.g., "solemnly learn" and "closely cooperate" on 5 June 2006), these phrases seem to stem from quoting CCP elites, rather than from the active effort of journalists to influence audience perception. This stands in stark contrast to CNN, in which it is almost impossible to see the word "Hamas" without the prefix "militant," or Iran not modified with "Islamic." On the other hand, there is also a clear indication of ideology at work. In terms of terminology, Taiwan was sometimes referred to as "Taiwan Island." At one point, it was also mentioned that, "Chinese people in the world want reunification of China" (3 June 2005).

III. International News

International news on CCTV has a surprisingly global feel, not unlike that of the CNN. During the week, besides covering the latest developments in technology and the arts, there was plenty of news about elections in the Czech Republic and Peru, the birth of Montenegro, bomb threats in Canada and Turkey, the role of China and Australia in stopping instability in Indonesia and in Haiti, and the superpower opinions of Russia, the U.S., and the U.N. on the ongoing crisis in the Middle East (Iraq, Iran, Palestine). While this variety may be normal in any global news media, one noteworthy feature is the extensive coverage of China's new role as an actor on the global humanitarian stage. On June 3 and 4, 2006, there was extensive coverage of the assistance that Chinese medics were giving to Indonesian earthquake victims. On June 3, the focus was on how much effort was put in by Chinese doctors to rescue an old man, while on June 4, news coverage was about how Chinese doctors taught locals about proper hygiene. In the latter clip, the contrast between the professional Chinese doctors in lab coats with the visibly tanned (and browned) natives in tattered clothing could not be more obvious. What is interesting is that while natural disasters in Indonesia have gotten quite a bit of global attention in recent times, I have only seen images of white people rescuing Indonesians and it is quite surprising to see this tacit discourse of white "Chineseness."

If this hints at China's superpower ambitions—or more accurately, its audacity to imagine itself as potentially equal to the West (just as Japan did in the 1980s)—the theme is even more obvious in CCTV's coverage of the situation in the Middle East. CCTV's coverage is dominated by three crises: the war in Iraq, the developing crisis in Iran, and the per-

petual conflict in what CCTV (unlike CNN) calls Palestine. Here, I will describe how CCTV covers each of these three crises before drawing out common themes. Readers should note that the excerpts cited were hastily written in a hotel room without the benefit of a pause button, and that half of the notes involve simultaneous translation. However, I made it a point to watch the English and Chinese CCTV news twice a day so that I had the opportunity to verify my notes.

News about Iraq always precedes news about the other two crises. Unlike CNN commentary, the situation is not described as "war" but as "American occupation." The language (e.g., transitivity, passivization) clearly identifies the U.S. as the one with the agency and Iraqis as the victims and recipients of U.S. actions. Besides presenting stories of U.S. aggression, the accounts often highlight the U.S. refusal to admit its war crimes and its deliberate attempts to subvert global justice. Another noteworthy point is the treatment of U.S. sources and voice, which is often delegitimized in that they are invariably brief, often presented at a skeptical distance (e.g., by prefixing their point of view with "the U.S. *claimed* that…"), with little substantiation, and, finally, often inserted perfunctorily at the end of the news clip. This is in sharp contrast to the lengthy and often humanized description of the victims of U.S. aggression and the sympathetic presentation of the logic behind their actions. This contrasts with CNN, which presents the U.S. and its allies as rational actors and their enemies' arguments as being without rationale.

> June 2 (Translated, my emphasis): Iraqis were *killed* by U.S. soldiers. The U.S. would *not admit error* but will conduct investigation into the matter. The U.S. *have killed a lot* of Iraqi people and *children* and this upsets Iraqis…In March, U.S. solders killed *children* and tried to *destroy evidence*; so far, *many women and children have died*. U.S. soldiers *claimed* that only four have died and that they are connected to terrorism.

> June 4: U.S. military probes *cleared soldiers of wrongdoings*. They killed a *75-year-old woman* and a *6-month-old baby*. The U.S. said four bodies were found but cannot say how many collateral deaths there were. The local police and people said that U.S. soldiers *shot children in the head*. The Iraqi PM said he will ask for the files to reinvestigate the matter. Such *unjustified killings* by American soldiers are common; they are *seldom investigated* and *never punished*.

News about Iran's nuclear program is usually the second most prominent story among news on the Middle East. Again, an American voice is barely present and treated very differently from that of the Iranian government.

> June 3 (translated, my emphasis): Iran was given a *harsh* option today. Iran said it was willing to negotiate but the negotiation *should not be conditional* and the U.S. should not give *excuses*. The U.S. stated that Iran must respond to the option presented to it.

> June 4: Iran will *consider* the proposal but finds it unacceptable. Iran says that it must be guaranteed *the right* to conduct nuclear *research* for peaceful purposes. Iran will only accept the proposal if it is *fair and just*. It is Iran's *legal and certain right*. If there is to be negotiations, there should be no conditions.

The news coverage of the Iranian crisis on June 5 is especially interesting. Besides a brief report about the situation, CCTV prepared a background story to accompany the story of the day, in which Iran warned that it might cut off its oil supply. In news analysis, what is selected as background information can intensify and politicize the message. In this case, the context that was supplied was geographical information (a visual map of the oil route) about the importance of Iran to the U.S. in terms of the quantity Iran supplies (4th largest oil producer) and the oil route (60% of oil to the U.S. goes through a strait that Iran controls). It is unclear what motivated news producers to create this background story. They were possibly driven by the professional desire to give context for unfamiliar viewers. Certainly a map is vital in helping audiences visualize the consequences of Iranian actions. However, in the context of the many conversations I had with taxi drivers about the U.S.'s actions in the world, it seems as if it is precisely professional facts and charts like these that fuel conspiracy theories in everyday talk. Indeed, I would not be surprised if Chinese audiences consider oil politics to be the most salient theory or the best explanation to understand U.S. policy toward the Middle East.

If CCTV's coverage of Iran and Iraq is critical of the U.S., what can we expect of its coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict? Although this is perhaps the most important conflict in contemporary history, it is one in which superpower involvement is more peripheral (compared to Iraq and Iran). Therefore, I believe, it gets less attention than the other two conflicts. Bias continues to be present in CCTV coverage (as is the

case with CNN) although it is much less intense than in the coverage of Iran and Iraq, but no less deliberate (this is explained later). In my week of intense viewing of CCTV news, there were three stories on this subject over two days.

The first story (June 4) was about a joint protest by Palestinians and Israelis to mark thirty years of Israeli occupation. It was interesting that this story would be considered newsworthy, especially when the day was filled with these other important events: Montenegro declaring independence and hoping to join the EU; the Czech opposition refusing to concede defeat to the Social Democrats despite losing the elections; upcoming Peruvian elections; and Russia seeking to join the EU. What is interesting is that even though this was not really a big story, it was given more prominence, in the form of a longer background story about the history and geography of the conflict. Again, which information is selected and presented as background facts is revealing. The background story featured a chronological map, showing how Israel expanded over the years (i.e., what areas were taken by Israel during which years).

This story was followed later by another story about the Israeli government cutting off funds to Hamas, the current Palestinian governing party. Unlike CNN, which prefixes Hamas with "militant" and always casts doubts upon its legitimacy, CCTV presents Hamas as the legitimate government of Palestine. The harm to Palestine was given a human face by facts about how Palestinian workers have not been paid for three months. While CCN would cover the same story about unpaid Palestinian workers, it puts the blame on Hamas as uncooperative and thus deserving of financial punishment.

The third story about Palestine is on June 5 and is about the EU's Solana pledge to support Palestine by supplying Hamas with funding. CCTV emphasized that the EU is giving more money to Palestine in 2006 than it did in 2005, and that the EU wanted Palestine to know that it "will not let them down." Unlike the other stories in which the U.S. or Israel are the aggressors, this story was not particularly politicized.

IV. Conclusion

The world in the Chinese imagination is one in which much of the international conflict can be traced to a few key troublemakers and one in which China, as it marches toward scientific progress and gains cultural strength, has a definite political and humanitarian role. The

world according to CCTV is one in which the U.S. acts in a unilateral, imperialistic, and anti-humanitarian way, in contrast to the environmentally aware and humanitarian China.

This picture of the world certainly does not resonate with the U.S.'s view of the world, as indicated by CNN. Throughout this essay, I have taken pains to avoid claims about which media source is more professional and objective. Indeed, I have tried to highlight the professional and stylistic similarities between the two (despite political differences) in the ways they privilege certain voices. After all, CCTV does model itself after CNN and, for better or for worse, has adopted many of CNN's good and bad habits.

Does this picture of the world resonate with the world that ordinary Chinese live in? It certainly does, but in a compliant, critical, and complicated way. An insight that never fails to amaze me is the incredible media literacy that subjects of authoritarian societies possess. Subjects who consume media in liberal democratic countries tend to have more faith in their media while subjects in authoritarian societies develop a natural and critical distance from the version of reality presented by their media because they are often so obviously pro-government.

To address the relationship between media and popular discourses in China, let me return to the case of the (informally) organized taxi-drivers' boycott of passengers at American embassies. The cab drivers are obviously critical of American imperialism, but does this mean they are uncritically agreeing with the message conveyed to them by CCTV, the mouthpiece of the CCP? In my conversations, Chinese subjects express tremendous dissatisfaction with their government, and the taxi drivers are very aware that they cannot organize themselves formally because they fear state repression. Their strategy of resistance is thus highly complex. By *not* protesting outwardly, they are at once compliant with state regulation and critically aware of state regulation. By *protesting anyway*, they are also at once compliant with the Chinese state's implicit anti-U.S.-imperialist ideology and critical of U.S. imperialism. ◉

Notes

1. My specific argument was that the myth/image of communitarian Asia was largely an American theory to explain U.S. economic decline vis-à-vis the "Asian Renaissance" in the late 1980s and 1990s. I offered two critiques. Firstly, from the point of view of rhetorical analysis, it is pointless to speak about communitarianism as a matter of fact. In Scandinavia, for example, communitarianism was used to argue for the welfare state while in much of East Asia, communitarianism was used to argue against the welfare

state and to promote filial piety economics, in which those who needed welfare would receive it from the family, rather than the state or corporations. Secondly, the type of values that is considered "good communitarianism" is painstakingly selected. In Singapore, the government favored the interpretations by American academics of Confucianism over local Buddhist monks because the latter did not encourage materialism, which was considered vital for economic development by the government.