

Article No. 7

The Discourse of Technology in Western Representation of China: A Case Study

Qing Cao

[Liverpool John Moores University](#)

Keywords

Western images of China, inter-cultural representation

Abstract

It is well documented that Western images of China have been oscillating historically for centuries. However insufficient attention has been given to examining patterns of underlying structures of representing China. This paper aims to address this issue through an exploration of latent perspectives in the British mass mediated representation of China. It is conducted through a semiotic and discourse analysis of a BBC television documentary series *Road to Xanadu*. The paper argues, central to the portrayal of China a technological view of society is formulated, through which Western and Chinese identities are constructed to arrive at a unified and unifying version of 'progress', erasing tensions, complexities and contradictions.

Introduction

In their study of Western images of China, Isaacs (1958) and Mosher (1990) summarise a temporal pattern of fluctuations of the representation of China: Some commentators (Isaacs, 1958; Jespersen, 1996; Mackerras, 1989, 1999) argue that the periodic polarization results largely from Eurocentrism and structural changes of Sino-Western relations. Mackerras (1999) applies [\[1\]](#) Orientalism and Foucaultian power/ knowledge theories to conclude that state-to-state relations are more important in image change than the 'realities' of China. There is an element of truth in their observations. It is clear that China's image was most negative during the second half of the 19th century when China was weakest. The intensified oscillation of the 20th century seems to parallel to a large extent to changes of Western political interests in China. However, beneath short-term external factors, political or commercial, there must be some deeper perspectives through which the non-Western world in general and China in particular are interpreted.

This paper attempts to explore such perspectives in the representation of China through the case study of a BBC television documentary series *Road to Xanadu* (BBC2, 1990). It aims to investigate four interrelated aspects: (1) what values, assumptions, and suppositions are conveyed; (2) what is the mechanism of visual representation and meaning realisation; (3) what are key features of the visual narratives and what discourse these narratives aim to serve; and (4) how the representation in the series is related to the larger Western discourse on China? The selection of *Road to Xanadu* is based on the following considerations. First, it is the most comprehensive history documentary ever broadcast in Britain about China (from the Classical times to the early 1990s). Second, it offers a representative account of the notion of *progress* - a central discourse in talking about China. Third, it represents a mainstream perspective: it does not set out to criticise China like some political documentaries in the 1990s [\[2\]](#), nor does it eulogise China like *Mandate of Heaven* (ITV, 1991) [\[3\]](#).

Road to Xanadu consists of four parts, each lasting around 45 minutes. Part One, *the Price of Harmony*, recounts major Chinese historical achievements from 250 BC down to the end of the Ming Dynasty, and cultural traditions of Confucianism and Taoism. Part Two, *the Invention of Progress*, introduces Sino-Western interactions between the 16th and the 19th century, including Jesuit missionary activities and the Opium War. The majority of this episode, however, focuses on Western scientific and technological breakthroughs during the Industrial Revolution. Part Three, *Dreams of Wealth and Power*, details Japanese experiences of learning from the West and her subsequent transformations. Part Four, *the Colour of the Cat* concentrates on post-1949 China from the new Republic to political events in 1989.

The rhetoric of image: defining a position

Television is primarily a visual medium. It persuades the audience through verbal rhetoric but often more effectively through its power of visual images. Silverstone (1983:141), following Arnold van Gennep (1960), argues that the viewing of television is to enter a liminal world of transformation which is both 'magical and *mythic*' (Silverstone, 1983:141). The *mythic* is realised through the magic of both verbal and visual composition. This paper applies a combination of methodological frameworks to examine primarily visual dimensions of the documentary series. Semiotic examination is enmeshed with a narrative analysis and supplemented by a discursive investigation. However, discourse is at the centre of the present study. It is believed that narrative and semiotic constructions are powerful means through which particular discourses about China are produced. The focus on semiotic examination serves primarily to illustrate the issue of *how* visual and linguistic compositions are appropriated by discourse. Ultimately, a television documentary, as a site for discursive struggle, produces discourse, through which it participates in wider socio-cultural and political processes of the British society.

The basic functions of television visual images include both the *mythic* and the *mimetic* (to be explained later in this section) of narrative. They are realised through what Fiske and Hartley (1978:40-47) call 'three orders of signification', following Barthes' exposition of 'visual signification' (Barthes, 1977). In *the first order*, the sign (visual image) is self-contained; the image has its literal meaning, and thereby the *mimetic* function is served. In *the second order*, a range of cultural meanings are activated that derive not from the image itself, but from the way a community uses and values the image as a sign (both signifier and the signified). The cultural meanings generated in the second order cohere into a comprehensive, cultural picture of the world; and it is this coherent and organised view of reality that forms *the third order* of signification. The last two orders operate to serve primarily the *mythic* dimension of a television narrative.

These three orders of signification correspond to Barthes' (1977) identification of three messages in a visual image: linguistic, coded iconic and non-coded iconic. The first message consists of linguistic signs - words that are two-fold in meaning: denotational and connotational. Without the linguistic message we are left with the pure image that contains an iconic message divided into *mimetic* (literal or denotational) non-coded and *mythic* (cultural or connotational) coded messages.

Parallel to visual examination, the analysis also focuses on Silverstone's (1983, 1984, 1986) two levels of narrative: *mythic* and the *mimetic*. The former is a symbolic structure and a mediation between chaos and order, reason and emotion, and past and present. The latter refers to the representational aspect of a narrative through both fidelity of image to a perceived and experienced world, and forms of literal explanation with commentary and informed voices that offer a guarantee of factuality and truth. The image is selected from infinity of possible images, and is an integral part of the overall effort to persuade. Within the *mythic* narrative there are two dimensions: a *chronology* of events and a *logical* structure of concrete categories. The focus of the present study is on the latter. The *logic*, strictly speaking, is not a logic of the tale as such but of the system of which that tale is but an element, and even more a *logic* of the cultural

context within which the system of tales is embedded. The cultural *logic* precedes its incorporation into the tale. The *logic* in the tale system functions to translate the general *logic* into those more specifically useful for the narrative. The central concern of the present study is meanings generated through structures of the *logic*.

An important feature of television documentary, according to Silverstone (1984), is that the *mythic* tends to pull the audience towards fantasy, but the *mimetic* pulls them towards realism. The *mythic* tells stories and the *mimetic* presents argument. The argument is the rational demonstration of the case to be made or the description to be offered. It tends to lead the viewer into the real world, appealing to intellect and maintaining a close relationship to empirical reality. In accordance with the label 'documentary', it does so with powerful visual images that through their presence appear to guarantee fidelity to a seemingly unmediated reality. 'Television's texts are therefore not true but plausible' (Silverstone 1984:397).

Finally, again, a note on discourse. My use of the word discourse is selective and within Foucault's sense of the term, limited to a particular aspect of documentary representation - how and what knowledge is constructed through narrative, both visual and verbal, in representation. Documentaries about China are seen as a discursive site where patterns of how certain subjects are talked about and represented through storytelling are examined. The delineation of semiotic formations is enmeshed with the analysis of the *mythic* narrative to explore the construction of truth and knowledge, and how assumptions, values, and identities are reproduced and reinforced.

Semiotic analysis of *Road to Xanadu*

In what follows, I use three groups of documentary extracts to examine functions of visual images in the construction of meanings in *Road to Xanadu* in both *mythic* and *mimetic* dimensions of the television documentary, illustrate how narrative is transformed into discourse, and through what mechanism representation is achieved. Discursive formations are delineated through in-depths analysis of visual images.

Table 1

Two 'Roads to Xanadu'

Visual image group 1

	Sequence One (Pre-title sequence of Part One)		
	Image	Filmic techniques	
		Voice-over	
Shot 1:	A stone bridge with arches over a wide river. People were paddling boats with long poles.	Close-up, panning from left to right steadily.	<i>with such success, beauty and wealth, China eventually came to be symbolised in the European imagination as Xanadu.</i>
shot 2:	The same bridge with people walking on it.	Medium shot, panning from left to right steadily	
shot 3:	A man paddling a boat in a river. A classical style Chinese pavilion in the sunset.	Medium shot of the man, then tilting up steadily to reveal a pavilion against an half-set evening sun, still.	<i>Xanadu was the ideal place but to maintain this perfection there was a cost.</i>

shot 4:	A group of pavilions against sunset glow. Title of Part One appears: 'The Price of Harmony'	Medium shot, still.	
Sequence Two (immediate post-title of Part One)			
Shot 1:	Skyscrapers in the city of Shenzhen.	Distant overhead shot, zooming out to reveal two buildings close to the viewer, tilting down steadily.	<i>For today's Chinese this could become their Xanadu. It is Shenzhen, a showcase, a special economic zone which the Chinese built in less than a decade.</i>
Shot 2:	Large English words on the front of a building: <i>Shenzhen State-owned Foreign Currency Free Department Store.</i>	close-up, still.	
Shot 3:	A moving escalator full of customers in what seems to be the inside of that department store.	Medium shot, low position, zooming in.	<i>It is a thoroughly modern city modelled on the cities of the West. Shenzhen is emblematic of China's first ambivalent steps towards the consumer society.</i>
Shot 4:	A group of women selecting clothes.	Medium shot, still.	
Shot 5:	A young man trying on a new suit.	Medium shot, still.	
Shot 6:	Electronic signals flashing on screens.	Close-up, still.	
Shot 7:	Workers sitting at a long assembly line to assemble electronic products.	Medium shot, panning from left to right.	<i>Here in Shenzhen's factories, Chinese workers assemble the high technology spin-offs of Western science.</i>
Shot 8:	A worker assembles an electronic product.	Close-up, zooming in to give details of what he works on.	
Shot 9:	A huge billboard in a street. The product is unclear.	Medium shot of a building, panning down to the huge advertisement.	
Shot 10:	A policeman directing busy traffic in a street.	Medium shot, still.	<i>But Shenzhen is the exception. It is distanced from the implications of</i>
Shot 11:	A huge Marlboro tobacco advertisement billboard with the image of an American cowboy in a busy street.	Medium shot, still.	<i>Tiananmen Square and distanced even further from China's other life.</i>

As an introduction to Part One, *The Price of Harmony*, the sequences establish central icons of the series and define primary meanings to be revealed throughout the documentary. Each sequence performs a variety of crucial functions at different levels. In Sequence 1, the *mimetic* is visually established through the pavilions and people that can readily be recognised as Chinese. In a poetic framing a sense of 'beauty' (sunset glow) is created to illustrate the voice-over commentary. However, a deeper *mimetic* is simultaneously realised through the iconic images by a linkage between the signs and documentary's central arguments – a *technological view of societies*.

A crucial argument that demand for water control is instrumental to the rise of the Chinese bureaucratic system is offered. The unique and largest imperial bureaucracy in world history is explained as an outcome of perceived organisational imperatives in harnessing nature. To support such a view, rivers, canals and water-related scenes are extensively displayed throughout Part 1, constituting a visual image of a hydraulic society. A subtle connection lies in the choice of the Southern Song Dynasty as the entry point into history[4] and as representing the pinnacle of the Chinese civilisation. Most film was shot in Hangzhou, capital city of Southern Song China (1127-1279). Portraying a hydraulic and Southern Song version of China[5] serves to present China through a technological lens. Song (960-1279) is selected to emphasise China's advance in science, technology and commerce[6] rather than Tang[7] (618-907) famous for its flowering in literature, art and religion[8].

Meanings could be delineated at different orders of signification. The first is simply the Chineseness of the image (*mimetic*). The second establishes the images as representing a 'Chinese Xanadu' – a failed route to prosperity when early achievements were replaced by modern stagnation. Signs in the denotative order become signifiers of a myth. The visual images lose iconic specificity of reference and acquire signification from constructed but interrelated myths - a hydraulic, Southern Song, and stagnant China. Eventually a unified but central myth is realised: the tragic future of this version of Xanadu. The lyrical beauty of rural life therefore acquires a sense of tragedy, a theme to be unfolded prominently later in the series.

Sequence 2 portrays a different but preferred version of 'Xanadu'. Like previous images, visual icons bear no necessary relations with the commentary except 'it is Shenzhen' which is selected as representing a 'real' Xanadu – an ideal world. However, among an almost endless choice of Shenzhen paradigm, the sequence is carefully constructed to orient towards a mythical Xanadu. Shot 1 establishes a new landscape: bright modern skyscrapers in contrast to the previous dark pavilion silhouette in a sunset glow. Shots 2, 3, 4, 5, 9 and 11 establish images of a consumer society: a modern department store, consumers selecting commodities and huge street billboards.

Shots 6, 7 and 8 emphasise the pivotal role of high technology in a modern age: flashing electronic signals, moving assembly lines and sophisticated electronic products. These images, too familiar in the Western culture, epitomise crucial features of a *real* Xanadu: technological, capitalist and consumerist. In a television medium the *visuals* define, aided by voice-over commentary, what is *modern* and *progressive* and what is *traditional* and *backward*. They inaugurate visually dichotomous categories summarised in Figure1 below. Technology as a central agent for the creation of wealth, and a defining component of progress, is embodied in consumerism.

seen as aspects of a different kind of logic: as part of a process whose aim is to produce fully satisfactory and plausible meaning; a process which offers us myths with which we are already familiar, and seeks to convince us that these myths are appropriate to their context.

Thus, the rhetoric of images mediates the reality through the creation of a plausible televisual world. The camera dwells on the grandeur of modern city (shot 1), mystery of hi-tech (shot 6) and material wealth (shots 3, 4 and 5). The more favourable technology and consumerism (*real Xanadu*) are framed, the more anachronistic the rural scene (*traditional Xanadu*) appears. The two sequences become metaphoric of what is *dynamic* and *stagnant*, *progressive* and *backward*, *urban* and *rural*, *futuristic* and *historical*, but more importantly *real* and *failed* roads to Xanadu. At the heart of such representation, however, technology-centred materialistic values are established.

The fusion of the technological and the social

To understand crucial differences between the two roads to Xanadu, we need to further examine Group Two visual images in greater details. The sequence is important because it establishes foundations for a series of underlying Western assumptions through which China is interpreted. Such assumptions are so deeply imbedded in certain versions of Western traditions that they are presented almost as given. The sequence starts 15 minutes into Part Two, *The Invention of Progress*, which recounts scientific and technological revolutions sweeping across Western Europe in the 18th century. Immediately before the sequence, Nicholas Copernicus, Issac Newton and the Greenwich Observatory are introduced as having greatly advanced science and technology. It is in this context that 'rationality' born of *scientific* breakthroughs is constructed to extend to the *social* world:

Table 2

Visual image group 2

	Image	Filmic techniques	Voice-over
Shot 1:	ship-builders working in a half-finished ship	medium shot, panning down from the sky to the ship being built.	<i>Since the early sixteen hundreds, Dutch merchants had been applying new mathematical discoveries to the practical problems of building better ships.</i>
Shot 2:	ship-builders inside a ship	close-up	
Shot 3:	ship design drawing with perspective measurements	close-up, panning from right to left slowly, showing details	<i>Design drawings using these new techniques of perspective revolutionised the construction of these ships.</i>
Shot 4:	details of the inside of the ship with a man climbing up the ship.	close-up, pan up as the man climbing up	<i>The Dutch built enormous vessels like the Batavia, now being reconstructed in Holland from a seventeenth century</i>
Shot 5:	details and a global view of the ship	close-up of a part of the ship, zoom out	<i>plan. Such ships were designed to make the arduous voyages to the Far East, and their mission was not to win souls like the Jesuits did, but to grasp the riches of trade with Asia.</i>

Shot 6: front part of the finished ship with the background of a windmill	close-up, van from left to right and zoom out, low angle	<i>These mighty crafts were a high point of Dutch technological achievement.</i>
Shot 7: the mast of the ship	close-up, van up to a flag	<i>The naval shipyards at Saardam were turning them out at one a week.</i>
Shot 8: carving on the ship	close-up, still	
Shot 9: a flank of a ship equipped with many guns pointing out guns	close-up, van from right to left slowly showing details of two rows of	
Shot 10: drawing of a ship and a man beside it	close-up of front part of the ship, zoom out to include a man beside it.	<i>But the trading ventures had to be financed. The wealthy merchants of Amsterdam were also innovators here,</i>
Shot 11: faces of four directors in sixteenth century dress.	close-up, van from left to right slowly to show faces of men, then down to a small globe beside the table. still.	<i>creating the joint stock company in which both investment and profit were shared. These are the directors of the Dutch East India Company.</i>
Shot 12: the trade charter and the territorial globe	close-up of the charter, zooming out to show the globe and the picture of three of the directors.	<i>Their Charter gave the company a monopoly in trade with the East and the right to wage war and govern foreign territories.</i>
Shot 13: A full blown mighty gun vessel sailing in the ocean.	Medium shot from the air, panning from right to left around the junk.	With the establishment of the British East India Company, the pace of trade with Asia picked up steadily during the seventeenth century.
Shot 14: The same vessel in the vast blue ocean	Long shot in the air	The Dutch ships plied the waters between Canton and the North Sea and a single ship load was worth as much as three and half million guilders.

The sequence inaugurates with workmen applying advanced technology to shipbuilding industry and concludes with a mighty junk at an open sea. The verbal track leads the viewer from 'mathematical discovery' to 'three and half million guilders' - an illustration of how science and technology generate wealth and power. However, the transformations involve a series of visual and verbal discursive constructions. Three key shots are analysed in greater details to identify central discourses realised through *mythic* structures behind visual images.

Shot 3 establishes the technological code: close-ups of technical symbols of a ship design drawing. The iconic message (technicality) signifies science and technology at several levels: the particular ship (local, denotational), vessels in the 17th century Holland (general, connotational), and science and technology of the 17th century Europe (global, connotational). Functions of linguistic message, according to Barthes (1977), is to *relay* the verbal utterance rather than to *anchor* a preferred meaning in visual images which, due to technical nature, do not generate an

unmanageable diffusing polysemy. In this sequence, the verbal contribution reinforces rather than anchors the meaning in the visual image.

Shot 10 establishes a central discourse of Western colonialism: a technological interpretation of European imperialism. It is achieved through the construction of 'a successful match' between *the technological* and *the social* as foundations of European 'progress'. The vessel represents 'a high point of Dutch *technological* achievement' (Shot 5) and the 'merchant innovator' represents a *social* institution to match the technological advance which 'revolutionised the construction of these ships' (Shot 3). The linguistic message (voice-over) anchors the polysemous visual image: to fix a relationship between 'the vessel' and 'the man'. However, the anchorage, with its double functions, not only 'denotes' this is a ship for a trading voyage and that this is one of the men who made it financially (institutionally) possible, but frames a positive image by naming the ship and the man respectively: 'trading ventures' and 'innovators'.

At the visual level, the literal message serves to provide identification of the scene - to correspond the verbal with the visual contribution. It is at the symbolic level that discontinuous connoted meanings are generated. The image of the vessel symbolises the European advancement in science and technology, deriving *locally* by framing the vessel as a result of 'mathematical discoveries' and *globally* through a series of stories in Part 2, *The Invention of Progress*. However, 'trading ventures' anchor meanings in the visual image to avoid alternative interpretations such as colonialism and imperialism. Images of fearsome guns on the vessel, and the voice-over 'to wage war and govern foreign territories' are oriented towards 'trade' - a legitimising discourse. Verbal narration consequently neutralises gunboats and the Charter that 'granted' 'the merchants' the privilege of using violence and occupation of foreign land, through *de-ethicalising* technology in the account of the role of science, technology and trade.

Furthermore, the Dutch 'merchant' is projected as capable of playing the progressive role 'required of him' in the great age of scientific and technological revolution. The social dimension of 'trading ventures' include not only financial institutions, but economic ('trading monopoly'), political ('govern foreign territories') and military ('wage wars') arrangements. The central message conveyed in the image 'the vessel and the man' indicates the merchant matches his scientist and technologist colleagues in making progress - the generation of wealth and power. Finally, 'the vessel and the man' conveys a deeper connotation: *rationality* - a primary concept applied to the *logic* of the narrative.

To bring home a technological view of society, Zheng He's maritime exploration is presented as 'an expendable luxury' in contrast to European profit-seeking overseas colonial expansion: 'to grasp the riches of trade with Asia'. Zheng's voyage is refuted as an invalid exercise as it does not serve practical purposes when it consumed rather than generated material wealth. Here lies a central issue in the construction of social reality: what criteria to apply in the assessment of historical events and what values are intended to convey? It is revealing to see how a different interpretation of Zheng's maritime exploration is formulated in another British television documentary, *Mandate of Heaven* (ITV, 1991)[\[11\]](#)

Mandate of Heaven

Western thinkers have always taken a brutally simple line on the stopping of Zheng He's explorations. For them it would be like calling a halt to man's space exploration on the eve of the first moon landing. It is proof that the Chinese are backward looking and ignorant, had no desire for new knowledge and were run by a load of high bound bureaucrats. Proof, too, that the West was the fountain of science and technology and progress, and had a monopoly on the spirit of enterprise.

Shot 14, a vessel at sea, achieves meaning at the most general level - the power of Europe born of scientific and social 'rationality'. A series of connotations are simultaneously realised: trade as

progress, science and technology as agents of wealth and power, and European scientific and social rationality. The rhetoric of image combined with verbal contribution transforms *history* into *nature*, which, Barthes (1977) argues, is the primary function of a narrative. The *logical* structures of this sequence are summarised in Figure 2 below:

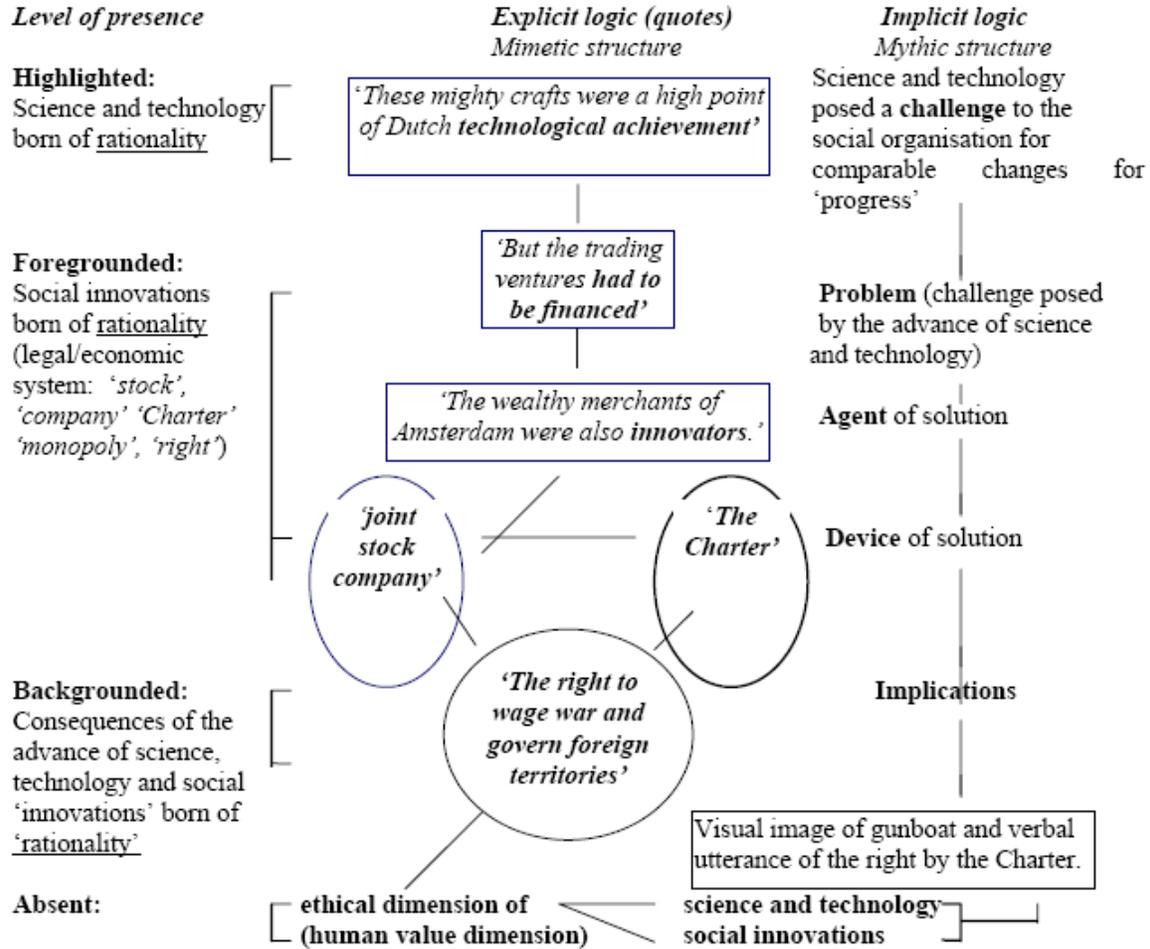


Figure 2. Logical structure of the West going East: analysis of the ship at sea

Closely linked to Group 2, the following sequences portray a further role of the West as progress.

The West goes to the East

In line with representations above, Group 3 presents another related but crucial myth of Western expansion: colonialism as civilising enterprise. European scientific and social 'progress' chronicled in Episode 2 is presented to 'expand' to other parts of the world.

TABLE 3

Visual image group 3

Image Sequence One	Fimic techniques (Three minutes after the start of Part Two)	Voice-over (<i>The Invention of Progress</i>)
Shot 1: a terrestrial globe rotating against a background of a shelf full of books.	close-up, camera fixed	<i>The European drive for discovery faced a China convinced of her own accomplishments and power.</i>
Shot 2: the globe rotating from Europe to North America then to East Asia	extreme close-up, camera fixed; the globe rotating and stopping at China, zooming out fast.	<i>For the next three hundred years Europe knocked on China's door and China's persistent rejection of Western ideas and progress led first to conflict and then ultimately to disaster for the celestial empire.</i>
Sequence Two (Three minutes after Sequence One)		
Shot 1: the Great Wall of China	long shot, still	<i>The empire isolated itself behind ancient fortified boundaries.</i>
Shot 2: the Great Wall of China	long shot zoom out slowly	
Shot 3: St. Paul church in Macao	close-up of a cross on top of a church, tilting down fast	<i>It was this isolation that the Jesuits of the China mission sought to breach.</i>

Sequence 1 launches stories of Western encroachment of China in a defining visual image: a terrestrial globe rotating against a backdrop of elegant books. The metaphorical visuals signifying the spread of knowledge and 'progress' creatively anchor the meaning of the voice-over 'the European drive for discovery'. The synchronising of the visual and verbal serves to activate a perennial myth - the civilising role of colonialism[12]. It is precisely in such crucial moments that visual narratives create a message larger than verbal composition. Thus framed, Sequence 1 defines and inaugurates subsequent Western conflicts with China in two dimensions of 'progress' - first *industrialist realpolitik modernity* (conveniently recounting pre-1949 China) and then a *humanist liberal democratic modernity* (portraying post-1949 China). Such *mythic* structures render China stories both meaningful and relevant. Nevertheless, it entails supporting categories (see Figure 1 above) to dichotomise the two civilisations, through which local sequences (stories) converge to arrive at global meanings in an ascending fashion.

Sequence 2, the Great Wall and the St. Paul's Church in Macao, as a natural extension of Sequence 1, reinforces stereotypical cultural identities constructed previously. It begins with a *mimetic* image of a 'fortified' China and a Jesuits' China mission. The immediate meaning is generated in the second order of signification: the Great Wall and the Church as symbolising two different cultures, and as signifiers of values each culture embodies. Literal meanings are appropriated by the symbolic power of visual images. Meanings are reinforced by filming techniques: the long, still, and then slow zooming shots of the Great Wall and a fast rising (by panning down) image of the Church in a close-up create strong visual contrast, emphasised by the music (slow, low-pitch and low-volumed for the former and fast, cheerful and high-pitch the latter[13]). An aging Confucian culture and a dynamic rising Christian culture are made clear. At a higher level, the images convey the unspoken assumption that a rising Europe 'needs' to breach the 'isolation' of China[14]. Furthermore, symbolic roles of missionaries are heralded: conveyors of Western culture and 'progress'. As emerging later in the series, the focus on Jesuits lies

primarily in the missionaries' introduction of Western science and technology to the Chinese imperial court, rather than converting the Chinese to Christianity.

Conclusions

Fundamental to the representation of China in *Road to Xanadu* is a technological view of society. Implied in such a view are a series of suppositions. First, technological development constitutes the ultimate criterion against which 'progress' is measured – a de-ethicalised industrialist *realpolitik* version of modernity. Second, advanced technology and advanced society are intrinsically interrelated: each is instrumental to the other. Third, a 'true' road to Xanadu is characterised by a society that is technologically advanced, capitalist and consumerist. These views constitute underlying frameworks through which China is interpreted.

Looking through the lens of 'technology' as 'progress', Western and Chinese identities are constructed, through which Western expansion and China's 'resistance' are formulated in such a way that a unified version of a Western technological and social progress is arrived. Central to this formulation of history is a reconciliation of a colonial or *progressive* 'trade'. 'Trade' as a neutral term becomes crucial in mediating between a *colonial* and a *progressive* history. The *realpolitik* 'trade' orients towards a progress-based European expansion. To achieve such meanings, the documentary provides a particular account of European scientific and technological breakthroughs.

Such a representation is achieved through *mythic* and *mimetic* structures of narrative, in particular through its powerful visual dimensions. The selected Southern Song images of China and technological images of the West are central in projecting particular versions of technology in service of the documentary's argument. The discourse produced represents a larger pattern of Western self-perceptions: Europe/the West as an engine for progress either in the form of a de-ethicalised industrialist or an ethicalised humanist modernity. Through such a lens other civilisations and value systems become largely irrelevant because they cannot be straightjacketed into a reductionist discourse of technologism or liberalism, against which 'rationality' is defined. Crucial to this nihilist discourse is Western inability to recognise plurality of values and human diversity. The claim to *ultimate truth* in the modernist discourse excludes other civilisations from 'world history' in Hegelian sense of the term. In such a context, China serves largely as a mirror for the West to see a reinforced self image. By so doing, the representation of 'other' functions more to reproduce the West than to advance the understanding and knowledge of the 'other'.

Bibliography

Amin, S. (1989). *Eurocentrism*. London: Zed.

Barthes, R. (1977). *Image, music, text*. London: Fontana Press.

Fiske, John & Hartley, John (1978). *Reading television*. London & New York: Routledge.

Hegel, G. W. F (1956). Sibree, J. (trans.). *The philosophy of history*. New York: Dover Publications.

Isaacs, H (1958). *Scratches on our minds: American images of China and India*. Westport: Greenwood Press, Publishers.

Jespersen, T. C. (1996). *American images of China: 1931-1949*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Kozloff, S. (1992). Narrative theory and television. In R. C. Allen (ed). *Channels of discourse, reassembled: television and contemporary criticism*. (pp. 67-100). London: Routledge.

Kuchnast, K. (1992). Visual imperialism and the export of prejudice. In P. I Crawford and D. Turton (eds). *Film as ethnography* (pp. 183-195). Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Mackerras, C. (1989). *Western images of China*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.

Mackerras, C. (1999). *Western images of China* (revised edition). Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.

Mosher, S. W. (1990). *China misperceived: American illusions and Chinese reality*. USA: BasicBooks.

Shohat, E. & Stam, R. (1994) *Unthinking Eurocentrism: multiculturalism and the media*. London and New York: Routledge

Silverstone, R. (1983). The right to speak; on a poetic for television documentary. *Media, Culture and Society* Vol. 5, 137-154.

Silverstone, R. (1984). Narrative strategies in television science - a case study. *Media, Culture and Society* Vol. 6, 377- 410.

Silverstone, R. (1986). The agnostic narratives of television science. In James Corner (ed), *Documentary and the mass media* (pp. 81-106). London: Edward Arnold.

Van Gennep, A. (1960). *The rites of passage*. London: Routledge

Notes

[1] Mackerras (1989,1999) claims to employ Orientalism and Foucaultian power/knowledge theories in his examination of Western images of China, but his largely descriptive survey does not analyse in detail what an orientalist discourse is produced and in what power/knowledge matrix.

[2] The 1980s is characterised by a generally positive media image of China. There was a flowering of culture and history documentary series about China in the UK. The image of China in the 1990s is predominantly negative with a series of high-profile 'investigative documentaries' such as *Laogai: Inside China's Gulags* (ITV, 1993) and *The Dying Rooms* (Channel 4, 1996).

[3] *Mandate of Heaven* is the only history documentary that praises the Chinese cultural traditions and criticises that of the West, constituting an 'oppositional discourse'.

[4] Most account of pre-modern China in *Road to Xanadu* centres on Song dynasty.

[5] Waterways, paddy fields, and Su style pagodas (the famous Six-Harmony Pagoda (*Liu He Ta*) in Hangzhou appears in the pre-title image) are iconic images of Southeast China. Changan (now Xi'an), the Capital of the Tang Dynasty, in North China has a very different landscape.

[6] For example, the narrator comments in Part One:

After centuries of at least official reverence for agriculture over all other forms of economic activity, the Southern Song dynasty and its Confucian officials recognised the value of commerce, buying and selling, a sharp break from orthodox Confucian philosophy.

[7] The attempt to privilege the Song over Tang dynasty is obvious. The pre-title commentary in Part 1 narrates:

Ruled by the Emperors of the Song dynasty, China was, even to Western eyes, the centre of civilisation - rich, peaceful, harmonious. China's crafts and products were manufactured on a grand scale. They were coveted throughout the known world. Her scientific skill and technological accomplishments placed China at the cutting edge of knowledge in the medieval world.

In contrast, the Tang dynasty is absent in the series.

[8] It is generally recognised the Tang dynasty, in particular during the reign of Tang Taizong and Tang Xuanzong, represents the peak of the Chinese civilisation.

[9] The sense of dependence on nature, apart from the local framing, derives largely from general views conveyed in the series. The same images, framed differently, could connote different meanings, e.g. *closeness* with nature and *peacefulness*. Rural scenes can be *inspiring* rather than 'tragic'. It is the verbal track that *fixes* meanings of the polysemous image: 'For today's Chinese this could become their *Xanadu* (Shenzhen)'.

[10] Again, the meaning derives not from the picture itself, or the denotative order of the sign, but from the second and third orders of signification, where myths of a changeless society are activated. The 'reading' of the images can be triggered by linguistic strategies and/or filmic techniques. Meaning is produced in the recognition of a pre-existing concepts rather than the language, visual images, or any other 'codes', which serve to activate the concepts. In making this statement, I am referring to the documentary as a text, not responses from the viewer. The viewer's reaction to television programmes could be different from the way in which the production team wishes the viewer to see the series.

[11] It needs to be noted that interpretations offered by *Mandate of Heaven* on Chinese culture is an exception rather than typical in British television documentaries. It is the only documentary that presents the Chinese cultural traditions as desirable. Exposition on Zheng He's maritime expedition by *Road to Xanadu* is, however, typical of Western mainstream interpretations.

[12] For relevant critique on colonialism, see Amin (1989), Kuchnast (1992), and Shohat & Stam (1994).

[13] Music is a key medium in television documentaries through which this voiceless narrating agency 'speaks' to the viewer. (Kozloff, 1992:79)

[14] In Hegelian notion of history, China is out of 'world history'. Hegel (1956:116) observed:
Early do we see China advancing to the condition in which it is found at this day; for as the contrast between objective existence and subjective freedom of movement in it, is still wanting, every change is excluded, and the fixedness of a character which recurs perpetually, takes the place of what we should call the truly historical. China and India lie, as it were, still outside the World History.

About the Author

Qing Cao is senior lecturer and programme leader in Chinese studies at Liverpool John Moores University, UK. His main research interests are Western representation of China and Chinese reporting of the West. His recent publications appear in *Journalism Studies*, *Journal of International Communication*, *East Asia*, *Concentric* and *China Media Research*