The Two Faces of Confucianism: Narrative Construction of Cross-Cultural Images in Television Documentaries

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Abstract
This paper has two aims. First, it attempts to delineate the broad features of the representation of Confucianism in British television documentaries. Second, it seeks to address the question of how representation is created in and by the mass media. Both issues are explored through an examination of the narrative structures and discursive formations of documentary texts, contextualized by the process of documentary making and Sino-Western relations. The conclusion is that at a textual level, conflicting images of Chinese traditional culture result largely from different understandings of this culture by documentary makers, while at a global level images are primarily determined by the general climate of Sino-Western relations.

Keywords
Western images of China, narrative, documentary, Confucianism, cross-cultural, representation

In his seminal work Scratches on Our Minds, Isaacs charts a temporal pattern of fluctuations of Western images of China, and argues that throughout history contrasting images of China have been created in the West. Isaacs’s views are echoed by a number of other commentators, including Dawson in his well-known The Chinese Chameleon. Interestingly, Mosher, three decades later, not only endorses Isaacs’s observations, but updates Isaacs’s model to the end of the 1980s:

Isaacs’s model: 1. The age of respect (18th century)
2. The age of contempt (1840-1905)
3. The age of benevolence (1905-37)
4. The age of admiration (1937-44)
5. The age of disenchantment (1944-49)
6. The age of hostility (1949-1972)

Mosher’s update: 6. The age of hostility (1949-1972)
7. The second age of admiration (1972-1977)
8. The second age of disenchantment (1977-1980)

There is an extensive literature on the study of Western representations of China, telling us a great deal about what images are presented and why (Isaacs; Dawson; Zhang; Mosher; Wasserstrom, “Afterword”; Jespersen; Li and Hong; Mackerras; Cao). The question as to how these images are realized and through what mechanisms, in particular in the mass media, has however not really been explored. To deepen our understanding of the Western images of China, the issue of how is at least as important as that of what. This is not only because how and what issues are intrinsically inter-related. Uncovering how an image is created is instrumental to fathoming the issue of why. As demonstrated in the analysis below, images are necessarily constructions in the service of certain interests. The how, what and why of construction are all integral to the deconstructing of images, and the making sense of representation as a mode of discursive practice in Michel Foucault’s sense of the term.

This paper represents a modest attempt to address the issue of how images are made, using Confucianism as an example. Specific aims of the paper are to examine broad features of the representation of Confucianism in British television documen-

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1 Following this line of characterization, we may add two more “ages” following the dramatic changes in the Western image of China in the 1990s and beyond. (The smooth handover of Hong Kong to China and increasing Western business interests in China eased harsh Western criticisms towards the end of the 1990s):

11. The age of unpredictability (1997-)

The uncertainties in representing China are mainly due to the fact that the West, especially the U.S., has been unable to formulate stable long-term foreign policies towards China in the post-Cold War era. Sino-American relations are often event-dominated as shown by the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, the mid-air collision, China’s entry into the WTO, and the international anti-terrorist campaign. The mass media reporting on China has been vacillating between two poles, what Chris Patten calls “Mammon or God” in his television documentary *East and West*. “Mammon” is business interests; “God” refers to human rights’ issues.

2 These are systematic and focused studies. Other similar examinations of Western representation with a historical dimension include Steadman, McClellan, Fairbank, March, Grayson, De Boer, Ropp, Fitzgerald, Friedman, Christiansen and Rai, Goody, Strahan, Dirlik, Q. Edward Wang, Spence, Li, Waley-Cohen, and Conn. The British studies include those of Dawson, Christiansen and Rai, and Goody.
taries, to explore narrative structures of documentary texts, and where possible to contextualize the production of these programs. My investigation is conducted primarily through charting conflicting portrayals of Confucianism in different programs and at different times. Confucianism represents a defining feature of Chinese civilization. Its media representation reflects broadly how China is perceived as a “different” cultural tradition. Here I select conflicting images as an analytical focus in order to demonstrate how meanings are achieved through constructed “stories.” However, not all documentaries fall neatly into one or the other category. The documentaries selected for analysis are situated towards the two ends of the spectrum. It is argued that the process of recounting historical events is enmeshed within the process of constructing ways of looking at China through the appropriation of “stories” or “myths.”

The method here consists of both discursive and narrative analysis. Discursive analysis allows a delineation of patterns of representation across documentaries, focusing on global features and a critical evaluation of the discourse. Narrative analysis includes both Propp’s and Silverstone’s (“The Right to Speak,” “Narrative Strategies,” “The Agnostic Narratives”) approaches. The former is employed to describe the global configuration of narrative representation in terms of chronological structures and general meanings. The latter is utilized to uncover internal mechanisms of meaning transformation through a delineation of logical structures of mythic narrative. Both Proppian and Silverstonian narratives are enmeshed within discursive analysis as in the mapping of Foucauldian discursive formations. The analysis is supplemented by insights gained from field interviews.

Data selected for this study include documentaries dealing explicitly with Confucianism supplemented by programs encoding views on Confucianism. The selection is based primarily on their degree of relevance to the given topic. Below is a list of key documentaries:

*China Women* (BBC2, 1981)
*The Heart of the Dragon* (Channel 4, 1983)
*The East Is Red* (BBC, 1985)
*Road to Xanadu* (BBC2, 1990)
*Mandate of Heaven* (ITV, 1991)

3 Only one documentary series included in the study (*The Dragon’s Ascent*) was not broadcast by a British broadcaster, though it was originally meant to be; see the following discussion.
Women of the Yellow Earth (BBC2, 1994)
Half the Sky: The Women in the Jiang Family (Channel 4, 1995)
China: Dragon’s Ascent (Phoenix, 2004)

A note of explanation is required for the 8-part series China: Dragon’s Ascent. The series was produced by a British production company, First Media Distribution in London, and intended for broadcast by a British television company in 2000—the Chinese year of the dragon. However it was eventually broadcast by a Chinese language channel in Britain, Phoenix, in February/March 2004. Strictly speaking, it does not represent images of China in British television documentaries in the full sense. But precisely because of the intricate nature of its production and style of broadcasting, the inclusion of this series is more revealing, and adds to our understanding of the dynamics of image-making.

Constructivist Views of Representation

Odoric of Pordenone (the 14th century) is the first Westerner to write about the custom of foot-binding in China. It is amazing, to a contemporary reader, that Odoric did not offer any criticism on this cruel practice against women. However, he is not alone in this. Mendoza, over two centuries later, provides a more detailed description of foot-binding, again without any critical remarks. Colin Mackerras attributes this to the authors’ extremely positive attitudes towards China. Questions arise here. How do we assess various representations of China? Do we evaluate the “facts” represented or “opinions” expressed over those “facts”? Do we need to measure the “accuracy” of representation against its “reality”? If not, what conceptual frameworks do we adopt in examining representations?

In the previous study of Western representation of China, two lines of inquiry emerge: reflective (or objective) vs. constructionist. The former tends to believe there is an objective representation that can be verified as “true” or “false” when measured against the “reality”; the latter holds that representation is necessarily not equivalent to reality, and that it is “natural” that observers of another culture employ different perspectives, and produce a version of that “reality.” The latter view tends to emphasize what is represented and what gives rise to a particular representation, in contrast to
the “accuracy” of representation emphasized by the former.

Mackerras is the first scholar who consciously applies a constructivist approach in his survey of Western images of China, drawing primarily on Foucault’s power/knowledge and Edward Said’s “orientalism.” Mackerras argues that the point of his analysis is not to evaluate what is right or wrong in the Western representation of China, as images are necessarily different from reality. It is more productive, for him, to see what kind of knowledge and truths are constructed, in what circumstances, and whose interests are served. There have been a number of similar studies along this line, such as those of Jenkins, Bennett, Chang, Wasserstrom (“Afterword,” “Putting 1989”), Christiansen and Rai, Jespersen, Zhang (Mighty Opposites), M. Wang, Yan, Wakeman, and MacKinnon.

However, many other studies are oriented towards a reflective view of representation, such as Jones, Isaacs, Dawson, Mosher, Chen, Li, and Yu. Mosher argues in his China Misperceived that his aim is “to write an objective account of the American perception of China” (22), though he never establishes the criteria for distinguishing “truth” from “fiction.” Dawson states that his attempt is to show “that they accurately reflect the situation there, and wherein they merely represent a response to European needs” (The Chinese Chameleon 2). Despite valuable insights offered in his study, Dawson too provides no criteria for how an “accurate” representation is to be judged. The weakness of the reflective view, as demonstrated by these studies, lies in a truth claim of “accuracy” and “objectivity” which is difficult, if not impossible, to justify. What seems to happen is that the assessment of “objectivity” is left largely to a personal judgment. Nevertheless, taking a reflective view does not necessarily mean such a study is invalid or flawed. Many studies, including Isaacs’s Scratches on Our Minds, contribute hugely to our understanding of images of China. What is needed is to resolve the apparent tension between a claim of objectivity and a convincing justification.

A constructionist approach seems to have largely resolved the tension by acknowledging the impossibility of matching “representation” with “reality” in an absolute sense, and by focusing on the driving dynamics, rather than “right” or “wrong,” of representation. Mackerras summarizes succinctly the kind of approach that would represent China in terms of a conceptual framework:

In general, there is no comment on who is “right” or “wrong” when observers present rival or conflicting views. Images are not and have never been necessarily the same as reality. At all times there is an infinity of re-
What all observers of China appear to have done is to filter what they see through the spectacles of their own backgrounds, ideologies, biases, and experiences, and they cannot avoid the impact of the period and place in which they live. It is nearly universal, and perfectly understandable and natural, that observers of another people remain firmly planted in their own culture. Some make more attempts at understanding, even appreciation, than others. Some are quicker to draw comparisons with their own civilization than others. Some are by temperament more eager to expose weaknesses or criticize, or alternatively admire and exult in what is foreign. (1-2)

It needs to be pointed out that the word *constructivist* is a relative term. As Zhang notes, no matter how much discursive construction is involved, the representation of history and culture is not entirely a form of “subjective projection, linguistic coherence, and ideological control” (*Mighty Opposites* 2). Acknowledging a “constructed” nature does not mean all representations can be reducible to a self-enclosed language game, or a purely fictional discourse. To insist on the reality of history outside of discursive construction is not to go back to a simplistic reflective view of representation, but to point to the limitations of “construction,” and therefore to avoid the danger of absorbing everything in the notion of “textuality.” It thus seems legitimate to examine discrepancies between various documentary representations and the reality of China, in particular when such discrepancies are conspicuous and significant. Such an examination will strengthen rather than weaken the central focus of various forces that give rise to the discrepancies, and therefore to certain representations.

### Textual Analysis: Two Faces of Confucianism

One major issue in the representation of Confucianism is how cultural identities are constructed and meanings assigned to them. In general, Confucianism is presented as being vital to the formation of the Chinese culture and society, and therefore to a deeper understanding of China. Two conflicting images of Confucianism emerge from the documentaries: oppression (*tyranny*) and benevolence (*harmony*). A crucial difference between them is that the former sees Confucianism as a code of *uni-directional relationships*, the latter as one of *reciprocal relationships*. These two versions of Con-
Confucianism produce two types of images, leading eventually to different meanings.

**Confucianism as a Uni-Directional Relationship**

The first version encompasses a range of documentaries, but is typically expressed in *Road to Xanadu*, *The East Is Red* and the four documentaries on Chinese women (see the titles above). By highlighting the Confucian virtues of loyalty, obligation and filial piety, this version accentuates the power of those in the superior position within traditional Confucian relationships—rulers and ministers, parents and children, husbands and wives. Below are two examples:

Those (Confucian) values would also become prevalent in the whole society, and the values of filial piety can easily be translated into loyalty towards the emperor; that is where the two ends as it were meet beautifully, ending with loyalty to the emperor, so that the emperor could not have asked for more. (*Road to Xanadu*)

All the world owed him (the emperor) allegiance, his subjects ought to obey him and defer to him, as they obeyed and deferred to the heads of their own families. (*The East Is Red*)

This is hardly a random interpretation of Confucianism; it is in line with the overall assessment of Chinese culture by these documentaries and the ways in which subsequent stories are constructed in the programs. Typically, the one-directional obligation is presented as lack—*-lack* in Propp’s sense of the term. Such lack can be traced back to the cultural tradition of male domination. In the political arena, however, lack is narrated along the line of tyranny because unlimited political power is seen to be sanctioned by a Confucian ideology of hierarchical relationships. The one-way-relationship version of Confucianism serves as a mythic structure in the portrayal of Chinese culture as “inherently flawed.” That is, major problems in China are de-

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4 Propp conceptualizes narrative structure in terms of narrative functions, or *dramatis personae*. He identifies 31 *dramatis personae* based on his analysis of Russian fairy tales. Lack is one of the most important *dramatis personae* and occurs at the beginning, inaugurating a story. Lack can be performed by anything which functions as something vital missing initially but regained eventually (in Russian fairy tales). In the subsequent text of this paper, *dramatis personae* are indicated by italics.

5 This paper focuses only on the cultural aspects of Confucianism. The political aspects, though equally fascinating, are beyond its scope.
picted as originating from the basic cultural lack of equality. In what follows, I focus on the portrayal of Chinese women to illustrate how a one-directional relationship is constructed and utilized in the telling of stories.

Women are central in telling “China stories.” The cultural lack of equality in Confucian tradition is translated into “tyranny” against women, dramatically exemplified by many stories in the documentaries. With the focus on their suffering from oppression, women, in particular older women, are presented as leading an unfulfilled and often miserable life through foot binding, arranged marriages and the pressure to produce male heirs. The insignificance of women and oppressive patriarchal power are articulated in each of the four documentaries on women, focusing on rural areas where traditional moral codes hold sway. All four documentaries foreground arranged marriage and foot binding, typically discussed by the “victims.” Small Happiness and Women of the Yellow Earth elaborate on the details of arranged marriage and bustling wedding ceremonies, in contrast to the indifference of the victimized bride. The public excitement (tradition) and private grief (individual bride) dramatize the prescribed roles women are forced to play in a Confucian society. The relationship between women’s fate and Confucian ethics is made crystal clear in the voice-over commentary:

It was Confucius who through his teachings founded the strict moral orders and political ideology that have dominated over 2000 years of Chinese life until the Chinese liberation in 1949 […] Confucius firmly separated women from men […] A woman is absolutely and unconditionally inferior to a man. Her first and foremost duty is to serve and obey her husband and his parents, to look after the household and bear healthy male children. For nearly two and a half thousand years, from the death of Confucius to the Communist liberation in 1949, the Chinese imperial social and moral order and its estimation of women remained inflexible

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6 After the handover of Hong Kong in 1997, British television lost interest in China stories, resulting in a sharp decline in programming on China. However, the limited number of documentaries still shows a fascination with “women” topics. The 7-part documentary series (the longest since 1997), Shanghai Vice, focuses mainly on stories about women in Shanghai. Two other post-1997 documentaries, New Mao Suit and Doctor Chen’s Sex Revolution, focus exclusively on women. All the stories show the lives of “liberal” and “modern” Chinese women.

7 All of the four documentaries on women highlight foot-binding except Women of the Yellow Earth, which tells the stories of two young married women (one a victim of an arranged marriage, the other of the one-child policy).

8 Women of the Yellow Earth has little commentary.
A woman was subjected to the “three obediences”: as a daughter she obeyed her father, after marriage she obeyed her husband, and if she outlived him she obeyed her eldest son. (*China Women*)

The problems the women face today are rooted in the old pattern of male oppression. In the past the most obvious sign of this was the practice of foot binding. (*Small Happiness*)

This *lack* of equality in women’s relationships with male members of the society, including their own sons,⁹ is projected as the primary source of their victimization. The narrative of arranged marriage, foot binding and the pressure of producing a male heir typically includes *lack*, *villainy*, *trickery*, *complicity*, and *transfiguration*.¹⁰ The *lack*-based sphere of action is inaugurated with *villainy* as a driving dynamic moving the narrative forward. This *lack*-defined *villainy* moves through three crucial stages of a woman’s life, each corresponding with a Proppian narrative function.

As a child, a girl is coerced into having her feet bound by her mother, who performs *trickery* as the first act of *villainy*. As a teenager the girl is compelled to accept arranged marriage through matchmaking, a second act of *villainy*. There is *complicity* when the girl accepts arranged marriage as the only option. Finally, the married woman becomes a willing partner in the *complicity* of favoring a male child. *Transfiguration* concludes this cycle of women’s life, not as a changed circumstance from the *initial situation* of a *victim* to a *rescue* or *victory*, but as a cyclical completion of a temporal journey, whereby a young girl is transformed into an old woman. The *transfiguration* does not alter women’s fate, but rather perpetuates it because the initial *lack* is not liquidated but rather reproduced. The dynamics of the *villainy*-dominated *sphere of action* are provided, to a large extent, by a rich, exotic and compelling range of dramatic visual images. Intimate and horrific views of crippled feet detailed by the camera, an extravagant display of wedding processions, rituals, local customs and lifestyles constitute the exotic function of a visual narrative. The dramatic social scenes contrast with the tranquil natural landscape in the open celebration of a village festivity. However, the tragic air is unmistakable.

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⁹ Obeying her son after the death of her husband is a radical version of male domination. It actually contradicts the Confucian virtue of filial piety. The well-known Ci Xi, the dowager who controlled the young emperor like a puppet, is an extreme example of the power of Chinese women at the other end of the spectrum—a quite different image in popular representations.

¹⁰ For a fuller explanation of these *dramatis personae* as narrative functions, see Propp.
Visual composition dominates the narrative principally in two ways. First, it sets the narrative pace by visually unfolding story-lines with minimal verbal participation. The flow of the story stresses the most cinematically accessible dimensions of public actions and private reactions. Second, foot-binding, matchmaking and wedding ceremonies, all meticulously documented, present a visual ethnography, producing drama, variety, excitement and myth. The public revelry, feasting and celebrations are frequently contrasted with the private apathy of not only the bride, but also of other female family members who are producers of food and providers of domestic services for men who, implicitly, play the role of oppressors.

Visual documentation not only provides the dynamics but performs the mimetic function vital to the television documentary’s claims to ontological authenticity. The double role played by the visual contribution—its mythic dynamics and mimetic “out-thereness”—are essential narrative dimensions emphasized by Northrop Frye and Silverstone (“The Message of Television,” “The Right to Speak,” “Narrative Strategies”). In a unified visual representation, heterogeneity was erased; lack provided narrative closure. The observed cultural identities point back to mythic uni-directional relationships reconfirmed by an ethnographic film, offering an impression of authenticity by means of the “arrival scene” (Nichols 219). Clawback, as defined by Fiske and Hartley, is a discursive strategy of associating a local text with a central focus of its message—a mythic meaning. Sharing some similarities with the Labovian “point of story,” a “discursive clawback” operates in an integrating fashion beyond local sequences to arrive at a global meaning. This means that some features of the subject are emphasized rather than others. A uni-directional relationship provides the organizing logic in a unified portrayal of Confucianism in the documentaries.

Confucianism as a Code of Mutual Relationships

However, in contrast to the imagery discussed above, a very different portrayal of Confucianism emerges in other documentaries, thus constituting an oppositional discourse. Three documentaries can be typically identified in this category: Mandate of Heaven, China: Dragon’s Ascent and The Heart of the Dragon. Confucianism is presented by these documentaries as possessing mutual or reciprocal relationships, where the obligation of both the superior and inferior within a Confucian relationship is
emphasized.\textsuperscript{11} This is characterized by presenting Confucianism as a philosophy, which shows us what constitutes an ethical society and how we could arrive at it: \textsuperscript{12}

His (Confucius’s) concern was that of every government today on earth, how do you build a \textit{just} and \textit{stable} society here, and his answer was this: \textit{goodness} was the essential quality needed to keep society together. People are not born \textit{good}, they need to be taught \textit{goodness}, rulers and ruled, but it was essential that the rulers were taught \textit{goodness}, spiritual and intellectual. (\textit{Mandate of Heaven})

The father’s \textit{love} and the son’s \textit{filial piety}; the elder brother’s \textit{kindness} and the younger brother’s \textit{obedience}; the husband’s \textit{dutifulness} and the wife’s \textit{compliance}. (\textit{China: Dragon’s Ascent})\textsuperscript{13}

Social and political harmony depends on the moral conduct of \textit{every member of society}. Each person has his own position and his own \textit{obligations}. Wife must \textit{obey} husband, son must \textit{obey} father, and all must \textit{obey} the emperor. But those in the position of power must \textit{respond} with \textit{righteousness}, \textit{justice} and \textit{wisdom}. You must obey with \textit{respect} and rule with \textit{kindness}. The cardinal Confucian virtue is this sense of \textit{humanity} and \textit{benevolence}. (\textit{The Heart of the Dragon})\textsuperscript{14}

Such a construction highlights the humanist nature of classical Confucianism,\textsuperscript{15} which
gives primacy to humanity and benevolence as emphasized by Mencius. Mencius’s concept of minben (people as the basis), prioritizing the obligations of the ruler, closely tied to the notion introduced in Mandate of Heaven, which is also a crucial documentary in the portrayal of the Confucian tradition:

Confucius’s vision then was of a moral society bound together by mutual respect and trust; and though he was an aristocrat it was an anti-authoritarian idea because the ideology would rest with the scholars, not with the emperors who themselves had to obey the golden mean, otherwise they risked forfeiting the “mandate of heaven,” as even today’s rulers of China have found out. (Mandate of Heaven)

“History as a Mirror,” an episode of China: Dragon’s Ascent, concludes with a direct quote from Mencius:

Win the people and you win the empire.
Win their hearts and you win the people.
Give them and share with them what you like,
and do not do to them what they do not like.
The people turn to a humane ruler as water flows downwards.

Such an interpretation, like that of uni-directional relationships, serves as a mythic structure to organize the different tales about Chinese society analyzed below.

In the episode “Caring” from The Heart of the Dragon series, a number of ordinary families in Harbin City, Northeast China are introduced during the Chinese New Year season. Every family is enjoying the traditional festival. The pattern of filmed celebrations is similar: family reunions, preparation and consumption of a big New Year’s Eve meal, game-playing and lighting of firecrackers. One of the families, the Ma’s, is presented as a “typical” one. The family consists of Mr. Ma, his wife, two daughters and Mr. Ma’s parents—three generations under one roof. A voice-over introduction to the family is followed by a lengthy monologue by Mr. Ma, spoken to an invisible interviewer:

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16 Contemporary discussions in China of Confucianism refer mostly to its Classical form, particularly in the recent discourse of the so-called revival of Confucianism represented by Pang Pu at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Tu Weiming at Harvard University. Tu even talks about “the possibility of a fruitful interaction among Confucian ethics, liberal democratic ideas, and Marxist humanism” (XXI).
My wife and I are equal. We respect each other, and love each other. We are both very filial to our parents. Our common responsibility is to educate the young to become useful persons in the country. We always discuss things together before making decisions. We do not have a “master of the house” situation as in the soap operas. I also wash clothes and cook. Financially, I can use the money my wife earns. My income is also at her disposal. This is how things are with us. A Chinese maxim says, “leaves fall to the root of the tree.” I take great care of my parents. It is our tradition. It is passed down from my grandfather to my father and to me. Our two children do not think we are too strict with them. They enjoy their happiness at home. We never beat or scold them. It is a matter of persuasion and education. We love our children very much.

Mr. Ma talks passionately about the virtues of traditional family relationships: mutual respect (huzhun, hujing), mutual love (huai) between him and his wife, filial piety (xiaoqing) toward his parents, and love (ai) for and education (jiaoyu) of his children. Emphasis is placed on respect, care and obligations. Mr. Ma sees these mutual relationships as age-old traditions essential for a “good family.” It is not difficult to see links between Mr. Ma’s contribution and the views offered by the documentary about Confucianism:

For Confucius, the essence of government was the bringing about of a harmonious social hierarchy. He took the family as his ideal. The nation should be like a huge family with a father at its head. It should be governed not by force but by moral example. The fundamental Confucian virtue was a sense of humanity, benevolence and respect for others.

Reciprocal relationships bound by obligations are emphasized by the documentary. Mr. Ma is a central provider of care as a son, husband, and father. He sees obligation as essential in performing his roles, and therefore in the fulfillment of his life. When citing the metaphor “Leaves fall to the root of the tree,” his voice grows tender, as if speaking on behalf of all Chinese sons about the philosophy of treating the old with respect. He speaks with pride and a contented smile: “It is our tradition. It is passed down from my grandfather to my father and to me.” There is no immediate framing in this monologue. It is preceded simply by the following voice-over:
When the festivities have died down, the camera goes back to No. 5. Mr. Ma, the railway policeman, is putting a lock on the wardrobe cupboard in the girl’s room, while his wife is on ward duty at the hospital.

This is followed by presenting old Mr. Ma, the grandfather, as a happy, contented pensioner: “Even though he has retired, old Mr. Ma, the head of the family, is treated with the greatest respect,” the voice-over tells us. It seems the selection of Mr. Ma’s family is done at random. “No. 5” was filmed simply because it happened to be there at the right time and right place. The documentary crew comes back indoors to continue the ethnographic filming of the Chinese New Year. The claim of randomness is made explicit at the beginning of this episode:

We wanted the streets to be filmed. We liked this one without knowing who lived in it and picked it as a free choice. It is called “Minor 18th Street.” We saw smoke coming under No. 5, went inside and met this man. He is Mr. Ma, a railway policeman with two girls, and his wife is a nurse.

This randomness was confirmed by Hugh Baker, editorial consultant for the series, in my personal interview of him. The family was picked by chance:

For the very first film of the series, the crew goes to Harbin and they go in the middle of winter [...]. They [the producers] got into a bus with the film crew and they said to the driver “drive.” And the driver drove, and they’d say “turn left, turn right, turn right again, turn left,” etc. So the producers did not know Harbin at all. They didn’t know where they were going. The bus driver and the people who were facilitating the trip didn’t know where the producers would tell them to go. And the producers, having said “turn right, left, right, left, right, left,” whatever it might be, said “STOP!” And they got out and they filmed. No attempt was made to stop them from doing that.

This randomness could be real: an effort made to be free from being constrained in field filming. The completed version of “Mr. Ma’s story,” however, is not an accident. The filming crew spent two and a half years in China and shot a total of 200 hours of film, cut into twelve 50-minute episodes in post-production (Clayre, Preface).
obviously was a reason for finally using only 5% of what was actually filmed. Furthermore, the commentary’s composition, verbal and visual juxtaposition and discursive sequencing are the work of the documentary makers. The randomness suggested by the commentary serves, among others, to point to the mimetic function of a documentary film—it’s ontological claim of authenticity and objectivity. Still, the internal structure of Mr. Ma’s story is manipulated in a way for the story to fulfill its mythic function, i.e., to illustrate the Confucian tradition.

In fact, all the stories of “Minor 18th Street” households which *The Heart of the Dragon* presents convey a similar message: the closeness, humanity and caring of a Chinese family. The caring extends to a wider social context in the subsequent prison story of the same episode. The father of a killer son talks to the camera about his failed duty as a father in “educating” his son properly at home, and expresses his delight at seeing him “making good progress” in reforming himself in prison. The prison’s warden, on the other hand, blames the disruption of (traditional) values during the Cultural Revolution for the rise of juvenile crime, and elaborates on the art of saving lost souls and transforming them into new law-abiding citizens (*xin ren*) through “thought reform (*sixiang gaizao*).” In a prisoner group discussion one inmate says gratefully that the prison staff treats them “like parents treat their children.”

Obviously, the “stories” presented in *The Heart of the Dragon* do not contradict the positive framing of Confucian traditions attempted by the voice-over. The empirical presentations—real people in real-life situations—are as such appropriated by the commentary. Local event-centered narratives are integrated in an ascending fashion into a global meaning: Confucianism as a code of mutual obligations. Such a construction is achieved by the inclusion of compatible “stories” and the exclusion of incompatible ones.

**Local Narrative and Global Intention**

The inclusion of which parts of the stories and the way they are told are a careful

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17 This series was produced during the second age (benevolence, 1980s). It is interesting that in the third age (disenchantment, 1990s) prison labor becomes a major topic for documentaries that are critical of China. The practice of “thought reform” in prison is presented as the most inhuman crime—“Communist brainwashing.” Typical of the prison labor documentary is *Laogai: Inside China’s Gulag.*
construction by documentary makers. The meanings realized through the narrative in fact derive from the producers’ specific understanding of China. Baker, for example, claims *The Heart of the Dragon* captures the “timeless” essence of the Chinese culture:

> We deliberately, right from the start, [...] planned the series not to be time-specific in that by 1985 it would be useless. We tried not to do that. What we were trying to do [...] were to show aspects of Chinese culture which were timeless, or at least which were very important in the present day, but important in the past too. We tried to show something of the historical process by which the China which our cameras were capturing emerged from the China which had been there for the last 3,000 years, 4,000 years, and we tried therefore to say, “this isn’t just a picture of China in 1983, 1984” when we shot the film. But this is something about China which has, we hoped, captured some of the *truth* about Chinese culture over a much longer time period and therefore has some validity into the future as well [...] It has got that kind of timelessness to it, that was our hope and that was part of the brief which I worked to when I made the series. (Interview)

The attempt to present “some *truth* about Chinese culture,” then, structures the overall meaning of *The Heart of the Dragon*. However, “truth” is not an equivalent of “reality,” but a subjective endeavor to grasp that reality. In a sense, it is this intention to capture the “truth” that inevitably determines which part(s) of the “stories” to include and how narratives are structured to convey an intended message.

This is, however, necessary and inevitable in documentary making. Coherence means that a balance needs to be achieved between local sequences and global meaning. Leslie Woodhead, film director of the 3-part documentary series *Inside China*, argues that documentaries are not made for anthropologists or their students but for the general public, and therefore certain forms that have to be used to engage the audience. It is for this reason that Woodhead said his film team is careful in selecting subjects:

> Instead of trying to film all of society to engage the audience’s attention, one makes microcosmic films of the macrocosmic culture. In other words, one looks for individuals who can articulate important things about their society but can be in themselves engaging and accessible to the audience [...] What we have always tried to do is to concentrate on a limited group
of people, one family, sometimes one individual or a couple of families in contrasting situations, and to try and understand them and make them the spokesmen for their society. (qtd. in Jenkins, “Disappearing World Goes to China” 11)

It is precisely here that the dilemma of documentary films lies, as media critic Alan Jenkins argues:

The average reviewer may take these people as being representative of the whole of the society [...]. This is the problem with any television documentary that focuses on one or two individuals, whether the documentary be made in Skokie, Bermondsey or Wuxi (China). But one can presume that the problem is greatly compounded if, as an average viewer, one knows little else about that society to balance against this particular representation. (“Disappearing World Goes to China” 12)

What is important, perhaps, is not whether this concern is shared by documentary makers. Significant is that for most documentary makers, a documentary has to be made within various constraints, at the same time made accessible and meaningful to the audience. Documentary makers have their own aims to achieve, those they sincerely believe will help the viewer to “understand” China. David Kennard, one of the directors of *The Heart of the Dragon*, claims that by plotting out a documentary, “one can achieve greater, broader truths” (qtd. in Jenkins, “A View of Contemporary China” 219). Alistair Michie, series producer of *China: Dragon’s Ascent*, makes clear that his series is “ground-breaking,” serving the purpose to present a “new” image of China which, he says, is “not fashionable” (Interview). This is an important view and therefore worth quoting in full:

I have taken a much more holistic view of global history. I mean you have to, in order to understand how China fits into the civilizations that make up the world. One of the problems that we have as Westerners is that we have what I call a very Eurocentric way of thinking. And this goes back into the last couple of centuries in the way that we evolved after the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution in Europe. In very crude and simple terms, a hundred years ago in this country when we thought we
were at the height of our imperial power, we thought we had given
civilization to the world. We thought we had invented everything. We
thought that in terms of science and in terms of manufacturing, we led in
everything. We looked down on people who didn’t have parliamentary
democracy as we saw it, a monarch like Victoria on the throne and the
Anglican Church. With our military power at that stage, we thought we
were unchallengeable. It gave us a way of thinking about the world which
I describe as Eurocentric, which blinded and still blinds us to other
civilisations around the world. You need to cast that off in order to be able
to see how China evolved and how China fits in the world today [...]. We
wanted to raise understanding globally about what China is and where it is
coming from. We wanted to show people the forest. If we had gone in
there and said, “Well, let us look at the issues that cause excitement in
China such as Taiwan, Tibet, Tiananmen Square, the one-child policy,
etc.,” then we would have gotten nowhere. (Interview)

Such a motivation clearly marks Michie’s portrayal of China, as it is on such an
understanding that individual sequences in his series are put together to realize the
“truth” he claims. It is therefore not surprising that China: Dragon’s Ascent has
become one of the major “oppositional” documentaries. Chinese civilization is assum-
ed to be a “given,” to be able to account for itself. Presenting Confucianism in
Mencius’s version is one component part of the overall portrayal of China as a unique,
resilient civilization that is regaining global significance. In its pre-title voice-over
commentary, “Family Values,” an episode in China: Dragon’s Ascent, states:

Family bonds have kept Chinese society tied together throughout its long
and difficult history. Family relationships and obligations became the
model for all other social structures.

It is not surprising therefore that stories in China: Dragon’s Ascent present an
obligation-based model of Confucian values in contrast to the tyranny-oriented ones in
other documentaries. Local narrative sequences recording “real-life” stories perform
only an instrumental function in the service of documentary makers’ intentions.
Cementing local sequences to realize global meanings is one of the crucial skills
documentary makers have to acquire. Another producer of China: Dragon’s Ascent,
Terry Bennell, believes that a documentary “has to be more than information because otherwise you are just reading an Open University textbook” (Interview). The craft of storytelling is central to the genre of a television documentary. It is in this sense that Silverstone claims that television is characterized by an “oral tradition” that he discusses in “Narrative Strategies in Television Science.” Storytelling is at the heart of television documentary’s capacity to realize meaning.

In _Women of the Yellow Earth_, the fate of rural women is presented almost entirely through real-life “stories” with hardly any commentary. However, the aim of the documentary remains crystal clear—the victimization of women by Confucian traditions. Its associate producer, Stephen Hallet, states: “We are interested in how women in remote areas in China live. Why do they live such a life? We are very sympathetic with their fate” (Interview). Visual narrative is meant to convey a sense of objectivity. However, visual representation serves no less powerful a tool in delivering the intended message. At one point in the film, Hallet disagrees with the director over a particular shot. For Hallet the camera dwells too long on an abortion, on the actual operation being performed on a woman. The director insists that the scene be highlighted to illustrate the “point” of the story—the plight of the Chinese women. “Realistic” presentation using the _observational_ approach can be just as careful a construction of “reality” as the _expository_ approach (heavy framing by commentary). “Truth” relies more on subjectivity than on “reality.” “Objectivity” is the outcome when subjectivity is perceived to match the reality.

### Concluding Remarks

A number of major studies on Western images of China conclude that the single most important determinant of change in our image of China are the structural relations between China and the West. Mackerras maintains that “government influence on popular images is usually more important than the converse” (187). The findings of

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18 Hallet was a British producer who speaks perfect Chinese. This interview was conducted mainly in Chinese. The quotation is translated into English by the present author.

19 Nichols identifies four modes of television documentary representation. According to him, the _expository_ mode is the most heavily framed, using “voice-of-God,” voice-over commentary. The _observational_ mode is the least framed mode of representation. The main differences between the two lie in the use of verbal or visual framing. But I argue that the difference between the two modes is only by degrees.
this paper seem to support this view. As shown above, positive images come mainly from documentaries produced in the 1980s—“the second age of benevolence.” Negative images, however, emerge mostly from those of the 1990s—“the third age of disenchantment.” Of all the documentary series, the two most positive are *The Heart of the Dragon* in 1983 and *China: Dragon’s Ascent* in 2004. These two series present a highly favorable image of Confucianism. A major post-Tiananmen series, *Road to Xanadu*, on the other hand, constructs a pessimistic picture of China, both culturally and politically.

The larger pattern of all documentaries of the 1980s and 1990s is clearer: the 1980s had a distinctively positive image of China, the 1990s a highly negative one. The 1980s were characterized by an unprecedented number of documentary series on China (eight series, 34 episodes), which focus primarily on Chinese culture and history. They largely present a favorable image, even of a Chinese prison, children, and the one-child policy. The 1990s will be remembered as a decade of sensational investigative documentaries. Typical of investigative programs is the secret filming of a “horrible crime” committed inside China. The most famous are two documentaries on prison labor and the abuse of children—*Laogai: Inside China’s Gulag*, *The Dying Rooms*, and *Return of the Dying Rooms*. The overall focus shifted from culture and history in the 1980s to political themes in the 1990s: Tibet, prison labor, child abuse, human rights, and Hong Kong. The pattern is remarkably close to what Isaacs concluded four decades ago: images of China swing from one extreme to the other. The only difference is that the pendulum is now swinging faster. The “age of respect” lasted a century (18th century), the “age of contempt” half a century (1840-1905). Now it takes only a decade for the pendulum to swing a full circle.

It is not difficult to see parallels between Western images of China and the structure of Sino-Western relations during these two decades. In the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping’s reform program generated renewed Western interest in and warmth towards China. But more important than this were the Western strategic imperatives—China still served as an important ally of the United States to counterbalance the “threat” from the Soviet Union. China’s open-door policy contrasted sharply with the unchanging “iron curtain” policy of the orthodox Communist Russia. The 1990s saw a completely different picture following the collapse of the Soviet empire and its Eastern

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20 These two series were also the most expensive to produce, each costing around £ 4 million. Both teams spent years in China for research and filming, which represents a serious effort to understand China in its own right.

21 These are *The Heart of the Dragon*, *Inside China*, *Spirits*, *Ghosts and Demons*, *Behind the Bamboo Screen*, *Long Bow Trilogy*, *Silk Road*, *Yellow River*, and *Red Dynasty*. 

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bloc. China suddenly found herself the only remaining significant Communist country. Friends and foes swapped places overnight just like China and Japan after World War II, the former from friend to foe (of the United States), the latter from foe to friend. Inside China the Tiananmen tragedy was transmitted live into the living rooms of a global audience. In Britain the situation was worsened by stormy relations with China in the run-up to the handover of Hong Kong following Chris Patten’s governorship, which began in 1992. It is hard to imagine images of China are not vulnerable to such dramatic changes.

However, it would be wrong to assume that images of China are neat and clear in each age. They have never been so. The images of China are always complex, entangled, multi-faceted, contradictory and interrelated. It is more productive to see representation as a complicated web of images interacting constantly with one another. It is a dynamic system—new images are constantly being created out of the old, either negating or reinforcing them, and seldom are entirely new. While broad patterns could be delineated at a global level for a structural understanding, each period is characterized by oppositional or contrasting images. The four documentaries on women is a case in point. Though two were produced in the 1980s and two in the 1990s, all are remarkably similar in their overall images and focus. This reflects perhaps a deep-rooted perception that Chinese (or indeed all “Oriental”) women are traditionally victimized by dominant males.22 Another telling example is Mandate of Heaven, which presents the most favorable image of the Chinese culture at a time when Western media were most critical of China in the aftermath of Tiananmen and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Again, the highly acclaimed, award-winning series Beyond the Clouds provides moving stories of ordinary Chinese people at the height of Western criticism of China.23

It is ironic that the human rights situation and living standards in China improved steadily in the 1990s as compared to those in the 1980s, but Western images of China were far more positive in the 1980s. Perhaps this adds new support to the view that images are not necessarily equivalent to the reality. Cross-cultural representation follows a logic that is yet to be fully uncovered and understood. Mackerras offers an

22 It is not surprising that in Western films “Oriental” women are often portrayed as meek, docile, childlike creatures. They seem to have been born to serve male needs. For a summary of Western images of Chinese women, see Chan.

23 The producer of the series, Phil Agland, persuaded Channel 4 to produce different images of China when the British media were engaged mainly in “political” reporting on that country. The series was eventually commissioned mainly because of Algand’s reputation as a producer (Interview).
interesting observation: the primary determinant of Western images of China is the West itself, not China (182). If this is true, it raises further questions: What is the nature of cross-cultural representation? Why do we even need such representation, after all, if reality does not need to bear a close relationship to images? What functions and purposes do cross-cultural images serve in a given society? All of these questions are beyond the scope of the present essay. Yet answers are essential if we want to move closer to a truly accurate reading of cross-cultural representations in general, and Western images of China in particular.

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