

Assignment China

A Documentary Series on American Reporting on China

WRITTEN AND REPORTED BY MIKE CHINOY

PRODUCED BY CLAYTON DUBE

PRESENTED BY THE US-CHINA INSTITUTE OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Reviewed by Charles W. Hayford

Journalism is the first draft of history. Now is a good time to look back on the journalism of the United States' relations with China and help our students understand how China has been reported and to be active and sophisticated users of the new media they seem to prefer.

Assignment China is a well-researched and beautifully produced projected eight-part documentary series written and reported by veteran Asia correspondent Mike Chinoy and produced by Clayton Dube for the US-China Institute at University of Southern California. In it, several dozen reporters and government officials go on camera to critically examine their own reporting about China from the 1940s to the early twenty-first century. Extensive newsreels and television footage lay out the twists and turns of events for the general viewer. Each self-contained episode (with one exception) is a little less than an hour long. The first four segments are now available on DVD and online. Three segments are now on YouTube at <http://tinyurl.com/cpevhtx> and a fourth segment is available on Vimeo at <http://vimeo.com/58909100>.

Our students do not remember the days when Americans knew little about China except that it was a poor, exotic place that inexplicably turned communist then decided to turn capitalist. In this series, Barbara Walters of ABC recalls that when she accompanied President Richard Nixon to China in 1972, most Americans thought Mao Zedong ate babies for breakfast. The public today sees China as a normal, powerful country, and a prosperous one at that. How did perceptions of China turn from one to the other?

Clayton Dube explains the themes of *Assignment China*:

The first is that news coverage does much to shape popular perceptions and influence policies and practices. The second is "how does one cover a quarter of humanity"? Who are these journalists? What do they focus on and why? What are the obvious and less-obvious obstacles to doing a credible job reporting on what matters in China (remembering that what matters in China may not matter to Americans)? The third is "how well have the big trends been reported"? What did the reporters do a good job on, and what important developments escaped proper attention? What accounts for those successes and failures?

Let's look at the four segments available as of fall 2013.

The Chinese Civil War, 1945-1949

At roughly half an hour, this episode is shorter than the others, but it is a good place to begin. Dramatic newsreels give a sense of the devastation as the armies of Mao Zedong defeated the Nationalist armies of Chiang Kai-shek. In 1945, few Americans remained from before the war. Most mainstream journalists spoke little Chinese and knew little of the countryside, so they hunkered down in the big cities; none accompanied Mao Zedong or his armies. The *China Assignment* interviews are sharp and illuminating. To take but one example, Audrey Ronning Topping recalls that as daughter of the Canadian ambassador, she rode to school in an embassy ricksha every



Audrey Ronning Topping. Screen capture from *Assignment China: The Chinese Civil War*.

day and saw corpses in the street. When she asked a Chinese government official about these people, who had nothing to eat but grass, he responded: "Oh, we don't consider them people." Most correspondents were convinced that the Nationalists could not prevail but had trouble getting that story across to the folks at home. Roy Rowan tells of working up an extensive article on the dire situation in Shanghai; but his boss, Henry Luce, the publisher of *Time*, felt hurt and unhappy and the big story never appeared.

Some of the most insightful comments in this episode are from

footage of a 1982 conference at Arizona State University, which reunited wartime reporters and diplomats. When asked whether they successfully conveyed the China story to the American public, John King Fairbank, the Harvard historian, replied, "We tried and we failed." Henry Lieberman, a wartime *New York Times* correspondent, disagreed: "We did a pretty damn good job."

The reporters' on-camera reminiscences are candid and articulate, but they don't delve into structural analysis. They explain the communist victory in human terms, which the public could understand: starvation, callous and corrupt officials, selfishness, and bad administration. Historians now emphasize that the Civil War was a conflict of party discipline and organizational control as much as ideology; battles that involved a million soldiers on each side were won by mobilization, organization, military leadership, and logistics.

China Watching

In the years after 1949, American journalists had to report on China from outside China. As the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution unfolded, a tight family of China Watchers in Hong Kong shared sources, traded insights, and fought for space in papers back home. The US Consulate in Hong Kong provided mountains of translations and refugee interviews, but reporters had to piece these jigsaw pieces into a coherent picture, which there was no way to verify. China Watchers knew of serious famines during the years of the Great Leap Forward, for instance, but had no way to know the scale.

Morley Safer, a Canadian who reported for CBS news, and Audrey Topping, also Canadian, were among the very few who managed to get tourist visas (the State Department promised jail and a fine for US citizens who might do the same). Their reports on their one-time visits, which ran in prominent national outlets, recounted both a calm, everyday China and also truly dangerous encounters with Red Guards. Being forbidden to visit China was infuriating, yet if American diplomats and reporters had been in Beijing during the Cultural Revolution, they might have met the same fate as American diplomats in Tehran in 1979. Several China Watchers recall how Nixon, when he was "politically homeless" before the 1968 election, sought them out on his visit to Hong Kong. He told them, "forget Vietnam; it's a sideshow," and grilled them on how the US might best deal with China.

This episode is eminently teachable because the interviews directly address questions that the historic footage covers.

The Week That Changed The World

Nixon's January 1972 trip to China was a diplomatic turning point, a media circus, and the start of the fall presidential election campaign. This episode is fascinating on the logistical arrangements and conscious efforts of both

the White House and the Chinese governments to control coverage. A White House aide recalls, “We did everything for the camera.” Robert Keatley of *The Wall Street Journal* said that television had a “love affair with an earlier China that didn’t exist anymore” and tried to make every shot exotic. Though we are told the stakes are high, there is relatively less time spent on the substance of diplomatic maneuverings.

This episode is the first to point out that these reporters were almost entirely men and that they “resented and shunned” the few women, such as Barbara Walters.



Barbara Walters and President Nixon. Screen capture from *Assignment China: The Week That Changed the World*.

Opening Up

In the long interval between Nixon’s visit and the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1979, fresh reporters, the first to live in China since 1949, were snatched from graduate programs, never to return. The US public was infatuated with China, and reporters could get almost anything on the air or in the paper: the first private restaurant, the first beauty parlor, the first private markets. This new wave of reporters spoke and read Chinese but lived in foreign compounds or hotels, cut off from normal sources. Richard Bernstein and Fox Butterfield talk about being among the print correspondents to quickly perceive that common Chinese found life difficult and the regime oppressive, but don’t speculate about whether the American public heard this message. Ted Koppel of ABC News adds that even the best story could not run without a picture.



Deng Xiaoping wearing his Stetson hat. Screen capture from *Assignment China: Opening Up*.

Incidental but telling anecdotes bring this period to life. Jay Mathews of *The Washington Post* observes that most Americans were bowled over by Deng Xiaoping, Mao’s reformist successor. Deng perhaps used his habit of frequent spitting to keep people off balance, but his aides asked US television crews, in the interests of friendship and cooperation, not to show the spittoons—Mathews calls this the “first act of self-censorship.” When Deng toured the United States in 1979, again, the image on the screen was more important than policy analysis. In Houston, Deng saw a space

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capsule and donned a Stetson hat, remarking that it was not often that a person could be an astronaut and a cowboy in one day. The flow of information was copious, but did the Stetson and the absent spittoon crowd out the real stories? Robert Elegant, a longtime observer, comments, “Sometimes we missed them, sometimes we got them.”

Further episodes are in production: “End of an Era,” “Anything’s Possible (1984-88),” a yet unnamed episode on Tiananmen in 1989, and “The Boom (1990s-2013).” A final overview episode will pull these themes together.

Conclusion

Assignment China thus raises challenging and teachable questions about four broad constituencies, each of which is diverse within itself and each of which uses “China” in different ways: one, China Watchers and the press corps in China; two, print and television institutional media at home; three, the two governments; and four, the Great American Public (the Chinese public doesn’t appear much). Constituency one tries to reach number four, but has to go through two and three.

Questions to Consider for Class Discussions

- What do we learn from “on-the-spot” reporting that we don’t get from textbooks and standard histories? On the other hand, what do eyewitness reporters miss in their “first draft” of history?
- How did reporters choose what to report and how to shape their interpretations? What language ability and knowledge did they have? How did editors and home offices change or filter their stories? Did the American public’s lack of interest in foreign affairs or infatuation with China distort coverage? Several episodes mention Henry Luce, the publisher of the high circulation journals *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune*.
- What can you find about Henry Luce and his role in China policy?
- What direct and indirect methods did the two governments use to control American coverage? Did reporters exercise self-censorship?
- The episodes report conflicts between print reporters and television journalists. What are the conflicts and trade-offs between the two modes?
- Would relations have taken a different turn if Americans had been better informed? Or were the clashes in Korea and Việt Nam the inevitable results of conflicts of national interest?
- Today, print and electronic media are shrinking their overseas professional staffs, while Twitter, Facebook, and other social media report instantly. Is a flow of reported facts enough to give background and context and produce genuine understanding?
- *Assignment China* is available on YouTube. What do the YouTube comments tell us about the questions posed by the series?
- The archives of *Time*, *Life*, *New York Times*, and many regional paper are online, as are State Department documents from these years. You can follow the reporters in this series. Take a comparable present-day conflict and compare the depth of reporting with what we see in *Assignment China*. ■

CHARLES W. HAYFORD is an independent scholar who has worked in the field of modern Chinese history and United States-China Relations and recently stepped down from the editorship of *Journal of American-East Asian Relations*. He has published several pieces in *Education About Asia*, most recently “Who’s Afraid of Chop Suey?” *Education About Asia* 16. 3 (2011), 7-12