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The Social Construction of International Imagery in the Post-Cold War Era: A Comparative Analysis of U.S. and Chinese National TV News

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Against the backdrop of the post-Cold War world and within the framework of the social construction of reality, this paper argues that social structure, both internal and external, is a major influence on the news. Using data collected during a 26-day period from China's CCTV and the United States' ABC, this study examines how the form and content of international imagery are socially constructed. Results show that the worlds created by ABC and CCTV apparently were molded according to the logic of views from "here and there" that are bound up with the social location of the respective news organization. The social construction of reality perspective suggests that the selection and presentation of news on the two networks depend not so much on the properties of the event or issue itself, but rather on its position in the broader social structure relative to its external context.

The collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe in 1989 and in the former Soviet Union in 1991 represented a dramatic change in the world's geopolitical landscape. It ushered in the beginning of the end of the Cold War between the Western democracies and the Soviet-dominated Eastern Communist block. This reconfiguration of the global structure undoubtedly shifted the power balance in international relations and coverage of the key players in foreign and domestic news around the world (e.g., Matlock, 1993). As editors of a 1993 issue on "Global News after the Cold War" in the *Media Studies Journal* succinctly put it, "For the media, the goal is to catch up with the world's changes and to develop a new overarching structure for covering news after the Cold War" (Vol. 7, p. xii). Among other things, the need for

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an overarching structure compels the media to make sense of a "brave and scary new world" (Heuvel, 1993), to seek "new opportunity for broadened coverage" (Graham-Yooll, 1993), to question "assumptions about coverage" (Gwertzman, 1993), and to call for "new ways of reporting" the post-Cold War world reality (Boccardi, 1993).

Either by design or by default, the United States, the world's remaining super-power, and China, the last Communist stronghold and the world's most populous country, are often brought into a post-Cold War power equation. To be specific, the "absence of clear, steady cues from Washington" makes the news media's reporting task more difficult (Hoge, 1993, p. 2) and in China, "old constructs are inadequate" in that the unpredictable society requires "a flexible and sophisticated journalistic perspective" (Tefft, 1993, p. 62). In international communication, the two countries' views of the world and of each other thus have practical and theoretical significance in post-Cold War news flow across national borders. Within the perspective of social construction of reality, the purpose of this paper is to examine the form and content of socially constructed international imagery in the United States and China and to assess their implications for better understanding the processes and structure of mass communication.

Comparative international communication research has long allowed researchers to study how the flow of news across national borders "fits in with [people's] images of themselves and others" and what influences that process in different cultural contexts (Lazarsfeld, 1976, p. 489). Since the 1950s, notwithstanding the "landslide proportions" of the literature in international communication (Hur, 1982, p. 531), comparative research has not only lagged far behind case and area studies, but failed to provide systematic insights into the social workings of mass media at the international level. Theoretically and methodologically speaking, much remains to be done in international comparative research (e.g., Blumler, McLeod, & Rosengren, 1992; Edelstein, 1982). Using social construction of reality as a conceptual framework (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Tuchman, 1978), this comparative analysis examines news in general and specific events in particular. Both are important in studies of national mass media systems in an increasingly integrated international environment (e.g., Rosengren, 1970).

Because the *causal process* that produces television news imageries varies from country to country as a result of different political, social, economical, and cultural conditions, it is often difficult to specify whether mass communication phenomena in one social unit can be effectively compared to that in another (Oyen, 1990; Smelser, 1976). The emphasis in this study is on the place or location of the news in the social structure, both national and international, that serves as the basis of its presentation and interpretation. Underpinning this sociological approach is the conceptualization that our perspective of the world is very much determined by where we may stand and the "range of vision" available to us (Blau, 1975).

Although the conception of social construction of reality is fundamentally rooted in socio-psychological processes, it can be extended from the personal to institutional on the one hand and from the obtrusive to the unobtrusive on the other. According to Wirth, "by virtue of its concern with the role of knowledge and ideas in the maintenance or change of the social order," the perspective of social influ-

ences on knowledge of reality "is bound to devote considerable attention to the agencies or devices through which ideas are diffused and the degree of freedom of inquiry and expression that prevails" (in Mannheim, 1936, p. xxix). He considered "the functions of the press, of the popularization of knowledge and of propaganda" to be one of these agencies or devices (p. xxix). "An adequate understanding of such phenomena as these," as he put it, "will contribute to a more precise conception of the role of ideas in political and social movements and of the value of knowledge as an instrument in controlling social reality" (p. xxix). In a broader sense, this line of reasoning echoes Weber's methodological viewpoint which argued that "only a *part* of concrete reality is interesting and *significant* to us, because only it is related to the *cultural values* with which we approach reality" (Weber, 1949, p. 78, emphasis in original).

Mass Media and Social Construction of Reality

The structural perspective—social construction of reality—has in recent years attracted growing attention in mass communication research and other related fields (e.g., Adoni & Mane, 1984; Benavot, Cha, Kamens, Meyer, & Wong, 1991; Chang, Wang, & Chen, 1994; Cohen, Adoni, & Bantz, 1990; Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992; Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992). These studies have focused upon news content as a form through which the mass media view an event or issue, what they perceive in it, and how they construe it in their production process. Using content analysis as a method, these studies seek to analyze the concepts, categories, and thought-models the mass media employ to formulate problems (e.g., what constitutes news) and their expression (e.g., how it is to be reported). There should be little doubt that in international communication the mass media have increasingly mediated traffic of cross-national news flow, in the process taking some aspects of the reality to be relevant and others to be irrelevant to the home country.

What constitutes the reality of a society, especially in a remote setting, is never given and generally comes from the news media (Lippmann, 1922). Social reality is a product of the interaction between the objective reality and a society's own pragmatic and social needs (Cohen, Adoni, & Bantz, 1990). The end result—verbal rituals and other crude forms of record in primitive societies and news in modern societies—is, in Boulding's words, "the transcript of society" (1956, p. 65). Within the boundaries and operational logic of the recording medium, this transcript takes note of events, issues, values, ideas, images, personalities, institutions, and experiences in and about a society, the totality of which becomes social knowledge that is relevant and useful to its members (e.g., Bernstein, 1976). In other words, the content and validity of social knowledge are ultimately tied to the general interests and common experience in society.

News as a form of knowledge has been recognized to be socially constructed and distributed. Park (1955) said that news is "one of the earliest and most elementary forms of knowledge," a way of seeing and thinking about the social world (p. 84). The organization and circulation of that knowledge help to shape "the individual and collective consciousness" of a society about its everyday life and the more

remote context of their lives (McQuail, 1972, p. 13). To paraphrase Barnes (1988), how a society acts, whether nationally or internationally, depends upon what it knows before it makes a move. To function effectively and efficiently, a society needs to make sense of its current practices and potential action.

Although Berger and Luckmann (1966) did not discuss how news may become part of the foundations of knowledge in everyday life, the essence of their treatise—the social construction of reality—can be applied, both theoretically and methodologically, to the field of news (e.g., Tuchman, 1978). As Hallin (1994) put it, "it is naive to imagine that journalists are free of social location" (p. 7). Journalists' social location, of course, is part of "the complex relationships that can exist among the political, cultural, and economic contexts in which [media] content is produced and distributed" (Ball-Rokeach & Cantor, 1986, p. 10). At the risk of oversimplification, the social construction of reality conceptualizes knowledge in everyday life on three dimensions: function (e.g., understanding and interpretation of subjective reality and sharing), formation (e.g., routinization, classification or typification, and relevance), and distribution (e.g., social dissemination and access to information).

This study monitored the flow of identical news in international context and provided a day-to-day comparison of news variation across national borders. Within the framework of social construction of reality, such a comparative design allows for a careful analysis of "the interplay between social structure and communications" (Merton, 1968, p. 493) and of "what people 'know' as 'reality' in their everyday, non or pre-theoretical lives" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, pp. 15-16). While trend analysis is useful in international mass communication research (e.g., Gonzenbach, Arant, & Stevenson, 1992), a comparison of between-nation variation may help to find patterns and relationships that can serve as a theoretical foundation for building more fruitful explanations of social construction of reality.

Social Structure and the News in China and United States

Although not necessarily couched in the social construction of reality perspective, the linkage between social structure and the production of news has been explicitly or implicitly addressed in studies on mass media in both China and the United States. The effect of socio-political structure on the spirit and practices of mass media prior to the Chinese reform movement taking shape in the late 1970s has been well documented (e.g., Houn, 1961; Liu, 1971; Schurmann, 1966; Yu, 1964). A common agreement indicates that news in China often results from the strategic position of the mass media embedded in the broader political system and their attachment to the powers that be as part of the ideological state apparatus. Chinese news tends to be predicated on how it might best serve the interests of the state's structural needs in political and social control, not on enlightening or alerting the public. This is the essence of the mass propaganda model that became the received perspective on mass communication in China throughout the first three decades after 1950. In this model, mass media are characterized as "limited outlets, a centralized hierarchical organizational structure, a unified circulation system, and an invariable content" (Wang & Chang, 1996, p. 197). As class ideologues, the

media defined and reproduced the central knowledge dictated by the state's political and ideological deliberations.

Following China's economic reform and open-door policy in the late 1970s, although the central authority has loosened its rigid control over the scope of content, the specific role, and general functions of the mass media (e.g., Chan, 1993; Lee, 1990; Starck & Yu, 1988; Zhang, 1993), the structural submission or subjugation of the mass media to the state in the form of party or governmental ownership and editorial guidance remains fundamentally unchanged. Notwithstanding, as a result of vertical fragmentation (e.g., decentralization of the state authority) and horizontal fragmentation (e.g., division of labor across media organizations) in the mass media (Wang & Chang, 1996), instead of acting solely as an ideological mouthpiece under the old command system, the mass media now have a market to serve and an audience to attract, creating a public space in which the media are expected to perform dual roles. There is evidence that media content in China, especially TV programming, has been closely tied to the changing socio-economic structure both within and without Chinese geopolitics (e.g., Hong, 1993; Wang & Chang, 1994, 1996). The news is no exception.

As far as the mass media system and social structure are concerned, the United States model is noted for its journalistic professionalism, media independence and autonomy, concentration of ownership and capital, technological and economic rationality, and functional arrangement of various social elements. A large body of literature has since the 1950s examined the structural position of the mass media with other social systems to determine how that relationship may affect the way media content, particularly news, is produced. From earlier studies (Breed, 1958; Gans, 1979; Gitlin, 1980; Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1980) to more recent research (Hallin, 1994), sociologists and communication researchers have provided consistent evidence indicating that media content is often shaped by the dominant conditions of the system, such as power structure and social alignments. Roshco (1975) was succinct, arguing "social structure is the major influence on the content of the press" (p. 5). Ball-Rokeach and Cantor (1986) summarized this line of research best when writing, "before the content is even created, there are political, economic, and social realities that set the stage for the nature of media content" (p. 14).

As bound by these political, economic, and social realities, news in the United States tends to be generated, according to Gans (1979), in a way that concentrates on nation and society about "their persistence, cohesion, and the conflicts and divisions threatening their cohesion" (p. 19). In other words,

> News stories and news commentaries can be understood as a continuous processing of raw information that makes the experience of a society comprehensible in terms of more general categories. These categories represent both previously articulated normative guidelines and more general value assumptions about *what to expect from social life*. (Alexander, 1981, p. 20, emphasis added)

This is part of the devices or modes of thinking that, within the perspective of social construction of reality, individuals or groups use to "accumulate, preserve, reformulate, and disseminate" their intellectual heritage in society and their connection to the social conditions in which they occur (Wirth in Mannheim, 1936, p. xxix).

A key premise of this study is that a society's stock of knowledge, including its fundamental world view or image of itself and others, is selectively constructed by a functional system of relevant or familiar practices (e.g., Bernstein, 1976) and is mass-reproduced in its social transcript—the news. This extends Roshco's (1975) argument that the publication or rejection of specific news stories is "based upon a social frame of reference derived from the social structure within which the press functions" (p. 113). The end of the Cold War provides an excellent opportunity to determine how different media systems—in this case, television in the United States and China—reproduce views, both domestic and international, of the social world amid the structural change of the larger global landscape. Specifically, this study seeks to answer these research questions:

RQ$_1$: To what extent is the social construction of national and international imagery in American and Chinese television news tied to the place or location of mass media in the respective national structure?

RQ$_2$: How does the changing world structure play out in the selection and presentation of international news in the United States and China?

RQ$_3$: What aspect of the world reality recorded in news as social knowledge in one country is shared or considered important by the other?

National Network News on China Central Television (CCTV) is compared with the *World News Tonight* on American Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) during a 26-day period, against the backdrop of social construction of reality, representing a modest and partial attempt to look at the above questions. In the absence of field observation, this content analysis reveals what was the end result of a long process of news production and reality construction, not how it was actually created and passed through from sources to reporters. Within the comparative context, the discussion of social construction of reality in the news is inferred from juxtaposition of cross-national phenomena between the United States and China, not necessarily hinged on direct evidence in either country. While content analysis can be used to study what and how social reality is constructed (e.g., Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992), it should be emphasized that it examines the static reality as it is manifest in the news.

News as "knowledge about," as Park (1955) put it, is "formal, rational, and systematic...based on observation and fact but on fact that has been checked, tagged, regimented, and finally ranged in this and that perspective, according to the purpose and point of view of the investigator" (p. 74). Conceptualized in this way, news as a form of social knowledge becomes a general and inclusive variable found in different social settings. To look at television news in both China and the United States therefore suggests that the two networks under study are *functionally equivalent* (e.g., Smelser, 1976) in reflecting existing social practices and national commitments and thus are comparable in their content. It does not, however, imply the conceptual equivalence of the two media systems in terms of their structural relationship with the powers that be in the respective country or their organizational attributes,

nor does it condone the Chinese state suppression of freedom of speech and of the press. To some extent, fear of expression in various forms still prevails in China (e.g., Tefft, 1993).

Since its rapid development in the 1980s, television has increasingly become an intrinsic part of Chinese daily life (e.g., Hong, 1993; Lee, 1994; Warren, 1988). Like its counterpart on ABC, the CCTV newscast is a 30-minute prime-time evening program. At the time of this study, it accounted for 42% of the total television audience, as compared to 30% for entertainment programs and 20% for other feature programs (Li, 1991). In 1995, there were 250 million TV sets in China, with an audience of 800 million. The development of Chinese television can be summarized by the emphasis of "Three One Thousands"—one thousand TV stations over the air (more than 970), one thousand cable stations (more than 1,200), and about one thousand educational stations (Zhang, 1995). With the proliferation of television stations, TV programming has also been expanded in quantity and quality. Several stations have established 24-hour channels (e.g., CCTV Channel 4).

CCTV Network News commands a strong viewership around the country. The advertising rate for the time slot immediately after the 7 o'clock news is the highest on Chinese television. But newly created news programs on CCTV, such as *Focal Point, Oriental Time and Space*, and *News 30 Minutes* also enjoy success. *News 30 Minutes* is a news program at noon that went on the air in April 1995. The other two are news magazine shows. *Focal Point* has become known for its investigative journalism which exposes corruption and other social problems in China. CCTV's *National Network News*, however, is still the authoritative source for international news.

Method

Video content of ABC and CCTV from June 15 to July 15, 1992 was taped and used in the analysis, with 5 days excluded from each network because of missing or incomplete data. Although the sample is not random, it covers a period longer than that in most previous content analyses of television news in the two countries. News stories on the two networks were analyzed, both quantitatively and qualitatively, by trained independent coders fluent in Chinese and English languages. Each individual story was the coding unit, regardless of its length.

As part of a larger project, the coding procedure identified and recorded the following elements: date of event occurrence, type of news, story format, placement, attribution, main actors, topics, primary country involved, length, and main themes. Part of the coding scheme followed, with revision, those used by Stevenson and Shaw (1984). Three types of news were classified: domestic news referring to stories about the home country's activities that did not involve any foreign country, foreign/international news dealing with stories about other countries, and foreign policy news involving the home country and at least one other country.

To facilitate comparisons and because of the apparent dissimilar social units involved, the broad concepts, and to a lesser extent, their categories, were chosen to avoid problems peculiar to a single setting (e.g., Smelser, 1976). These variables

dealt with the general categories of when (e.g., temporal space), who (e.g., individuals or groups), what (e.g., events or issues), and ideas (e.g., common themes that ran through the events and issues) that would be most visible and identifiable on television news in either Chinese or American society. To a large extent, they corresponded to the categories Gans (1979) used in his analysis of nation and society in news. In addition, the main thrust of each story was noted. Although they did not directly tap "knowledge about" per se, these news stories nevertheless constituted a kind of knowledge that articulated at a given point in time the scope of observable social practices, commitments, or problems. The intercoder reliability coefficients (Holsti, 1969) for the variables reported here were as follows: date of event occurrence, .92; main actors, .81, topics, .89; primary country involved, .96; and main themes, .90—an overall average coefficient of .90.

Results

In the 26-day period, CCTV broadcast 840 stories, with an average of 32 stories per newscast, and ABC carried 385 stories, averaging about 15 stories per lineup. CCTV story length averaged 54.3 seconds, much shorter than ABC's 82.4 seconds. Quantitatively, both ABC (69.9%) and CCTV (57.1%) tended to focus more on domestic news than other types of news. Compared to ABC, however, CCTV devoted more attention to international and foreign policy news (42.1% vs. 29.4%). Qualitatively, the nature and scope of domestic or foreign news on the two networks varied noticeably, depending on whether the story was situated in a national or international setting.

On CCTV, the domestic news tended to be ritualistic, progressive, and "puritanical" in that events and issues often revolved around current national efforts and governmental activities or achievements in moving the country forward, including collective concern and action against such natural disasters as flood and drought. For example, an anti-drug campaign aired one day after the opening of the National People's Congress and the Political Consultative meeting and the conference on the study of Deng Xiaoping's speech, with a total of 11 stories running over four consecutive days. Similar cases abound, with daily coverage of activities of leaders. For foreign news, CCTV was non-ceremonial, conflict-laden, and tactfully self-serving in that events or issues were packaged in a manner that would, when juxtaposed against domestic news in the same line-up, create a subtle comparison showing a stable and vibrant Chinese society, hence a way of seeing China in relation to other countries. By contrast, ABC's domestic news avoided the trappings of dignitaries and civic boosterism, focusing instead on telling stories that, as Tuchman (1978) documented, drew upon and reproduced institutional and social structures. Its foreign news, on the other hand, followed a pattern that persistently built on American ideas and interests (e.g., Gans, 1979). Stories such as children's right to work, racial problems, and homeless veterans were typical of this story-telling, with modes of interpreting the world embedded in the narrative structure of news through verbal messages and visual images.

Based on the aspects examined in this study, it is also evident that the two net-

works presented prevailing national thoughts and social priorities in their respective news coverage. During the 26 days, the "knowns," or familiar names or people with well-known positions (Gans, 1979), dominated the national news on the air in the two countries. These knowns included the U.S. president; presidential candidates; and federal, state, and local officials, determined by their location or position in the power structure (RQ_1). The distribution of stories in China was similar. Table 1 compares ABC and CCTV reports of the main actors (see notes for definition) involved in the news. ABC gave most coverage to individuals/media/public opinion (29.6%), followed by interest groups (17.2%), head of state (13.0%), and political/party officials (11.2%). The salience of the first two categories underlined, in part, the U.S. presidential campaign and the Democratic convention at the time, in which polls, individual voters, and business as well as other groups occupied prominent positions in the socio-political hierarchy.

Table 1
Main Actors Covered by ABC and CCTV*

Main Actors[#]	Medium	
	ABC	CCTV
Individuals/Media/Public opinion	29.6%	15.2%
Interest groups[$]	17.2	21.8
Heads of state	13.0	12.4
Political/Party officials	11.2	6.1
Military/Militia/Security	7.6	11.4
Ministers/Cabinet members	5.7	15.8
Courts	5.4	0.9
UN/International organizations	4.8	5.0
Congress/Parliament members	2.4	3.7
Provincial/State government officials	1.8	2.6
Local government officials	0.9	3.5
Diplomats/Ambassadors	0.3	1.6
Total Number of Stories	331	684

*Due to rounding errors, the percentage total may not add to 100. Other or unidentifiable actors were excluded.

[#]Actors refer to primary individuals, groups, or other entities that do things or are affected by events in a way that is essential to the story or comment. Actors may be individuals, plural or institutional. The main actor is the main subject of the story, usually the first mentioned.

[$]Because activities of protest, negotiation, and lobbying rarely occurred in China, they did not represent major attributes of "interest groups" as commonly defined. In this study, entities involving factories, companies, labor unions, or peace groups were coded as interest groups.

Because activities of protest, negotiation, and lobbying rarely occur in China, in this study, interest groups were broadly defined, including entities of factories, companies, or labor unions whose interests catered to particular segments of the social structure. Interest groups led other categories as main news actors (21.8%) on CCTV. Further analysis shows that interest groups accounted for more than one-third of the domestic news (34.3%) on CCTV, but appeared sparingly in international (9.0%) and foreign policy stories (5.0%). In contrast to ABC, CCTV carried many reports of achievements by factories and companies in their productivity or technological innovations in various areas. In the Chinese context, this apparently demonstrated the special position collective interests such as factory workers hold in Communist society. It also implied, either directly or indirectly, the success of reform policy in transforming Chinese commercial and manufacturing sectors from a rigid command system to a socialist market system.

High-ranking governmental and military officials showed up more often on CCTV, with individuals/media/public opinion receiving less attention. Given the relatively insignificant role and influence of individuals in the process of collective decision making in China, the finding could be reasonably tied to the Chinese social and political structure. For instance, within the study period, CCTV ran an average of almost two stories per day about the role of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in Chinese society, ranging from military performance and personal sacrifice to its contribution to economic progress, social construction, and nation building. The relative prominence (41 stories in 26 days) of the PLA-related stories on CCTV, a state-owned party apparatus, clearly underscored the military's inextricable link to the legitimacy of state power, and thus the television network's imperative to affirm the PLA's presence in society at large. While the PLA's involvement in reform movement stories might be considered a logical outcome of China's process of modernization, its significance lies in the fact that the military constitutes one major pillar buttressing the success of Communist authoritarian rule (e.g., the 1989 crackdown on the pro-democracy movement at the Tiananmen square in Beijing). To put the PLA's role in perspective, during the same period ABC reported fewer than one story per day (22 stories) directly or indirectly related to the U.S. military, of which nearly half (10 stories) dealt with gender and racial issues (e.g., sexual harassment). These two kinds of military news—the recurring positive images in the Chinese scene and the less frequent, controversial ones in the American setting—apparently are functional in that each serves as a force to promote the maintenance and continued transmission of certain social knowledge.

As reported in Table 2, the apparent difference in news concerns between ABC and CCTV further supports the above observation and answers RQ1. Several events and issues attracted considerable amounts of coverage by the two networks: internal conflicts in Yugoslavia, South Africa, and the former Soviet Union; strikes and protests in the U.S. and France; and Russian President Yeltsin's visit to the United States. On ABC, the top topics were politics (22.0%), the economy (16.7%), and the military (13.8%), with social services/health problems (12.5%) receiving substantial coverage. The most visible were American POWs in Russia and the 1992 presidential campaigns. CCTV tended to emphasize the economy (24.4%), diplomacy (13.9%), and technology (7.2%). Reform in China is economic in nature. The

Table 2
Topics Covered by ABC and CCTV*

Topics#	Medium	
	ABC	CCTV
Politics	22.0%	8.1%
Economy	16.7	24.4
Military	13.8	9.1
Social services/Health	12.5	4.7
Crime/Law	8.2	4.0
Social unrest	4.2	2.7
Human interest	3.4	1.0
Sports	2.9	4.0
Diplomacy	2.9	13.9
Transportation	2.4	5.6
Disasters/Accidents	2.1	2.7
Technology	2.1	7.2
Environment	1.9	1.5
Culture	1.9	6.2
Agriculture	1.1	2.8
Entertainment	0.8	1.2
Obituary	0.5	1.1
Religion	0.5	– –
Total Number of Stories	377	825

*Due to rounding errors, the percentage total may not add to 100. Other or unidentifiable top-
ics were excluded.
#The focus is the main topic—what the story is mainly about.

Chinese government's commitment to reform was well captured in CCTV's promi-
nent coverage of economic and technological issues. The common coverage of eco-
nomic news, coupled with the paucity of environment stories (less than 2% each), on
both ABC and CCTV partly supported Heuvel's observation that "issues that took a
back seat to the Cold War—the environment or economic development—now
receive more media attention" in the post-Cold War period (1993, p. 13). The news
gathering of the two TV networks were not broad enough to include news categories
that might surface following the emergence of the new world order.

On CCTV, the emphasis on diplomacy demonstrated China's long-standing prac-
tice of showcasing its diplomatic activities with other countries, such as Chinese
President Yang Shangkun's visit to three African nations during the study period. As
will be noted later, this and other major stories relevant or deemed important by
CCTV in the Chinese context were totally ignored by ABC. As social transcript the

Table 3
Central Themes Covered by ABC and CCTV*

Central themes#	Medium	
	ABC	CCTV
Racial issues	7.3%	3.1%
Religious/Ethnic antagonism	6.5	5.7
Social justice	3.9	0.1
Human rights/Freedom issues	1.8	—
Sovereignty	1.8	2.9
Terrorism	1.8	1.0
Relations with developing nations	1.3	3.1
Nuclear arms proliferation	0.8	0.6
East-West relations	0.5	0.4
Economic reform	0.5	12.5
National development	0.5	15.1
Aggression/Repression	0.3	1.5
Capitalism	0.3	—
Democracy/Democratic reform	0.3	1.0
Communism	—	1.4
Imperialism	—	0.5
Mao Zedong Thought	—	0.5
Rich-poor/North-South division	—	0.6
Power struggle	—	0.2
Regional cooperation	—	2.5
Socialism	—	1.5
Total Number of Stories	385	840

*Due to multiple coding, the percentage total did not add to 100.
#Themes refer to news angles, conceptual framework, and the like that are present in the content, but which may not emerge clearly from the classification of topics. They are conceived as aspects of news coverage that cut across the topic classification. The overall rule is that the theme in question should be clearly present in the story in a recognizable way. Each theme was coded as either present or absent.

news takes and records certain features in its immediate and remote environment as social knowledge.

The different news orientations—thus different range of vision and different sectors of reality—between the two networks becomes more evident when the themes that cut across topic classification are examined (see notes in Table 3 for definition). On the two networks, the presence of themes was clearly tied to currency—nation-

al concerns and social practices. CCTV tended to cover, however, among other things, those thematic aspects (e.g., regional cooperation, Communism, socialism) that might transmit specific knowledge to Chinese society. To some degree, so were ABC's themes manifesting U.S. social commitment (e.g., human rights/freedom issues) conspicuously absent on CCTV. In any given social setting, the absence of certain concepts (e.g., human rights) "indicates very often not only the absence of certain points of views, but also the absence of a definite drive to come to grips with certain life problems" (Mannheim, 1936, p. 274). It could be argued that omission of certain concepts implies the referents of those concepts simply do not exist or are proscribed. In the symbolic world of news, the latter appears to be more plausible.

On CCTV, about 30% of the total stories revolved around two salient themes: national development (15.1%) and economic reform (12.5%). The economic reform theme echoed the Chinese government's policy initiatives. Development news, particularly news of technological innovations and construction of new transportation systems, is an important characteristic of nation building in a developing country. China is no exception. These two themes could also be found in CCTV's foreign policy news. For instance, the theme of Chinese economic reform came up in high-ranking officials' meetings with a Japanese delegation, former U.S. Secretary of State Al Haig, and a Swiss delegation. None of the above stories, even those involving U.S. business executives and former officials, made it into the ABC news. The appearance of internal economic development as a theme in CCTV's external relations reporting clearly suggests a connection between the international structure and social construction of reality. This linkage would certainly help the Chinese public to make sense of the complexity of China's evolving external socio-economic conditions and its potential impact on the internal development.

Although the theme of religious/ethnic antagonism was identified on CCTV, it appeared mainly in such international stories as crisis-ridden Yugoslavia, South Africa, and the former Soviet Union. Not a single story in CCTV's domestic news involved this theme, even though it was widely known in foreign media that China has been facing increasing religious/ethnic conflicts in Tibet and Xin Jiang, an autonomous administrative region in northwestern China. ABC's top three themes were racial issues (7.3%), religious/ethnic antagonism (6.5%), and social justice (3.9%). There should be little doubt that these themes exemplified the essence of American national and international priorities at the time and represented long-lasting social struggles. In terms of RQ3, what is significant here is that both ABC and CCTV gave racial issues and ethnic antagonism relatively substantial coverage throughout their story lineups, confirming NBC news anchor Tom Brokaw's observation that the process of national rebirth in the post-Cold War period "leads to ethnic disputes" (quoted in Heuvel, 1993, p. 12). CCTV's near silence on social justice and failure to address human rights/freedom issues could be expected within the social construction of reality perspective since these two categories did not fit well in China's centralized socio-political system, thus not deserving to be part of the Chinese world view or collective psyche.

While themes correspond to a particular structural and contextual definition of the news content, they do not necessarily allow for a closer examination of the interplay among nations, which might better explain how news as a form of social

Table 4
Top 15 Countries/Entities Covered by ABC and CCTV*

ABC		CCTV	
Yugoslavia	15.9%	United States	12.0%
Russia	12.9	Japan	6.5
France	11.4	Yugoslavia	6.0
Britain	7.6	Russia	5.1
South Africa	7.6	Hong Kong	4.6
United Nations	6.8	United Nations	4.6
Germany	5.3	Britain	3.9
Japan	5.3	Germany	3.4
Israel	4.5	Tunisia	2.7
Finland	2.3	Taiwan	2.6
Vatican	2.3	South Africa	2.4
Iran	1.5	France	2.2
Iraq	1.5	Israel	1.9
Philippines	1.5	Ivory Coast	1.9
Soviet Union	1.5	Armenia	1.7
Total Number of Stories	132		415

* Percent of stories devoted to the country or entity.

knowledge was transferred and circulated between and within societies (RQ$_2$). A look at primary countries involved in the news should be illustrative. The data show that CCTV's window on the post-Cold War world was wider than that of ABC's. Of the 840 stories on CCTV, almost half involved 67 foreign countries and 11 international entities, with an average of 5 stories per country/entity, most of which were either underdeveloped or developing nations. For every two countries reported on CCTV, ABC covered just one. On ABC, 132 stories dealt with 25 countries and 5 international entities, with an average of 4 stories each. According to Table 4, the two networks shared nine countries or entities in their coverage of foreign countries, with different order and scope: Britain, France, Germany, Israel, Japan, Russia, South Africa, the United Nations, and Yugoslavia. As far as individual countries were concerned, such different orientation again reflects each country's existing international commitments and national involvement.

Among the top 15 countries on CCTV, the United States was the most reported, accounting for 12.0% of the 415 stories. The result is in line with Warren's (1988) study, indicating the persistent prominence of news about the U.S. on Chinese national television. Japan was a distant second, followed by Yugoslavia, Russia,

Hong Kong, the United Nations, Britain, Germany, Tunisia, Taiwan, South Africa, France, Israel, Ivory Coast, and Armenia, in that order. Five of these received no coverage on ABC. The prominence of Tunisia on CCTV resulted from the Chinese President Yang Shangkun's state visit. ABC's top 15 countries included six nations/entities that were shunned by CCTV: Finland, the Vatican, Iran, Iraq, the Philippines, and the former Soviet Union. While CCTV paid most attention to the United States, ABC did not report anything about China in the entire study period, other than mentioning it in passing in one single story about American POWs during the Korean War. On ABC's news radar, China, with all its international activities, simply could not be found.

Whether by design or by default, this discrepancy and the presence of Hong Kong and Taiwan on CCTV offer pieces of concrete evidence suggesting that international imagery is to some extent culturally bound and socially constructed (RQ1). This is especially true in the daily comparison between CCTV and ABC in that each network usually considered events or issues closer to home more newsworthy than those farther away. For the most part, the two networks often did not see eye to eye as to what to cover. What they did cover tended to be connected to the country's structural position in international relations as a result of either currency or immediacy. Such gathering and dissemination of a particular kind of knowledge can be best observed when their spotlights converged (RQ$_3$).

Of the combined total of 1,225 stories reported on CCTV and ABC, only 16 stories (1.3%) were identical in terms of their topics, news angle, and scope of coverage. These 16 stories spread across a 12-day span, suggesting that on any given day both ABC and CCTV agreed that at least one story was worthy of coverage both in China and in the United States. On a wide spectrum, these stories covered sports, political assassination, social protests, natural and man-made disasters, crimes and law, politics, military actions, space technology, human interests, and economic issues. The question is, why were these stories alike in a cross-national setting? To be more specific, how did these stories play out in the structure of international relations between the United States and China, setting them apart from all other stories?

From the CCTV perspective, the 16 stories represented international or foreign news, including eight stories about the United States. The eight stories about the U.S. looked at Irangate, a railroad strike, an earthquake in California, a train accident in Minnesota, a space shuttle landing, Democratic Vice Presidential candidate Al Gore, the sentencing of Noriega in Florida, and the Democratic convention. What should be worth noting is that CCTV spent more time (46 seconds) covering a U.S. domestic disaster—the train accident in Minnesota—than did ABC (22 seconds). This case demonstrates that the form and content of specific news in a given social structure may be determined by its national or international context. Many of these stories clearly had no ostensible bearing on Sino-American relations, nor did they necessarily pose any local concern for the Chinese audience. The significance of these American stories on Chinese television, like many other stories, therefore lies probably not in their content, but the symbolic form they take in framing the United States. The structural connection of this kind of news practice becomes clearer when the network is shifted to another nation, thus changing the news perspective and its current tendency. From the ABC point of view, these stories were essentially domes-

tic while the other eight stories were international, of which none focused on China. Within a comparative context, the worlds created by ABC and CCTV apparently were molded according to the logic of views from "here and there" or location and distance between the object and subject.

If these 16 stories are an indication of shared news standards between CCTV and ABC, they suggest few commonalities inherent in international news coverage. What they reveal is the extent to which the structure of international relations might determine the direction of news flow across national borders. A detailed examination of daily coverage of CCTV indicates that it reported a total of 66 news stories related directly or indirectly to the United States, including the eight identical stories carried by ABC, with an average of about three stories per day during the study period. Over the same time span, of the 593 Chinese domestic and foreign policy stories on CCTV, Beijing's activities, for example, involved diplomatic and economic interaction with countries such as France, Japan, Italy, Cambodia, Bolivia, Portugal, Switzerland, Romania, and the Philippines, many of which might concern Sino-American relations one way or the other. None appeared on ABC. It is difficult to imagine that news of the Communist superpower remaining after the collapse of Communism elsewhere had nothing to offer to the American viewers during a 26-day study period.

As a guide to China's window on the outside world, the unequal and imbalanced traffic of news across national borders points out the significance of the United States as a major news center in the world of Chinese TV news, but not vice versa. This U.S. status supports Tunstall's observation that "the United States will continue as a powerful player in the world news scene" (1992, p. 99). The absence of news about China on ABC suggests that China has yet to project its images of world importance far beyond its own borders. In a sense, it also means that viewers of ABC still could not, as the editors of the special edition of *Media Studies Journal* put it, "hear the trees falling" in China after the Cold War (1993, Vol. 7, p. xii), nor could they see a forest out there.

Discussion and Conclusions

Within the perspective of social construction of reality, the purpose of this study is not to identify what is in the news that makes it worthy of mass production as a commodity, but to examine through a comparative analysis its location in the social structure that determines how the news as a form of knowledge is socially articulated and circulated. The former assumes some universal attributes embedded in the events or issues that may lead to their coverage in the news. The latter argues that the world of news changes according to the relative positions of "here and there" and their relevance to each other.

Although a combination of field observation and content analysis would be more powerful in addressing how the mass media construct social reality in the news, several conclusions can be drawn from the patterns exhibited in the data. First, for each social unit, certain segments in society tend to hold a relatively higher position in the hierarchical domain of news as a result of their strategic location in the social

structure. That strategic location in turn may depend on a functional system of relevance or significance associated with the social actors within a particular national or international context. Across national borders, those news actors do not necessarily assume or command similar entry points into the world of mediated reality.

Second, the news often recognizes prevalent societal experience and national concerns to the extent that the world out there is likely to be viewed from a narrower conceptual range of vision. In international communication, the binding factors are usually culturally bound and socially delimited. Ethnocentrism in the news is thus a matter of degree, not kind. A society's typification or formation of another's image can be expected to lie in its knowledge about the facts that have been rearranged in this and that perspective, according to the demand of context and continuity. Amid extraordinary global political, social, and economic changes, an understanding of the role of the news media in sorting out the "risks and opportunities" (Hoge, 1993) and in redefining the world view is crucial in the post-Cold War world.

Third, the world on television news varies in size and shape as a function of the international structure within which a country situates itself and views its relationships to other nations. On a comparative scale, the world's hot spots on TV news seem to be organized by systematic means that give more weight to events or issues in some countries. To a great extent, a society's news media function as part of the knowledge-cumulating institutions, allowing the public to make sense of the spirit and practices of its own world and the land beyond.

As mentioned earlier, following the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the breakup of the former Soviet Union, both journalists and diplomats alike have expected the news media to reflect and broaden their reports of new patterns in the post-Cold War global structure. Findings from this study indicate that American and Chinese national TV news networks have indeed offered their respective audiences a world view that has attempted to capture the larger picture through a variety of international images within and across national borders. As far as Sino-American relations are concerned, the lack of flow of news from China to the United States on ABC leaves a vast country and its people unaccounted for after the Cold War. The implications for the new international order may be profound.

Fourth, quantitatively, within the conventional thinking of a balanced or reciprocal flow of news among nations, such as the New World Information and Communication Order (see, for example, Masmoudi, 1979), the one-way traffic of news between China and the United States is problematic. It might be attributed to structural inequity in international communication (e.g., domination of the West over the rest) and could be interpreted as a form of Western media imperialism or hegemony (e.g., Meyer, 1989). It is difficult, however, to imagine that China as another power in the equation would concede U.S. predominance. Such reasoning of imperial or hegemonic structure in international communication as an explanation in this case is thus unsatisfactory. Qualitatively, despite the fact that Chinese TV reporting of U.S.-related issues appeared to be neutral, it did carry a relatively higher proportion of stories about disasters and accidents in the U.S., as compared to all other countries combined. To look at the presence of negative U.S. news as recurring Chinese propaganda within the narrower framework would be simplistic and does not make room for the appearance of many neutral and positive accounts. "A

good theory," as Galtung argued, "should never leave us with the idea that the world is made once and for all" (1990, p. 102).

Chinese mass communication since the reforms of the early 1980s has been changing rapidly in its structure and processes. The dominant belief in China's mass propaganda and persuasion through news could not effectively explain journalistic practices of relative autonomy and professionalism that have emerged (e.g., Chang, Chen, & Zhang, 1993). Within the framework of social construction of reality, it is evident that a broader conceptual approach to the study of international communication should be in order, especially after the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The social construction of reality perspective suggests that the selection and presentation of news on Chinese television depend not so much on the *properties* of the news itself, but rather on its *position* in the larger Chinese social structure. U.S. television news is also reflective of the structural commitment and practices of its society.

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