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Readjustment of Orientalist Gaze: “Made in China” in Western Documentaries

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Abstract: Western documentaries about China have always been subject to the framework of orientalist gaze, such as the chronicle of warfare in *Attack on a China Mission* (1900) and *The Battle of China* (1944), the travelogues in *Peking and Its Surroundings* (1910) and *Shanghai's Great World* (1929), as well as the exploration of Communist Utopia in *Chung Kuo* (1972) and *Images de Chine* (1974). Against China's rising global manufacturing output, “Made in China” has become a recurrent motif in a surge of Western documentaries. BBC's *The Chinese Are Coming* (2011) and *Click: Designed in China* (2016) arouse heated discussion in China, revealing a readjustment of Orientalist gaze. Unlike *The Chinese Are Coming*, which positions China as an object of judgment or an external threat, *Click: Designed in China* shifts the narrative toward technological capabilities and innovation, highlighting the challenges China faces amid its rapid industrial and technological rise. This paper analyzes the transformation of the image of “Made in China,” arguing that while the discourse in *Click: Designed in China* has undergone some adjustments, it still operates under the gaze of Orientalism. And the transition from manufacturing to innovation should be understood as its strategic readjustment under changing global power relations.

Keywords: Documentaries; Made in China; Orientalism; *The Chinese Are Coming*; *Click: Designed in China*

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标题: 东方主义视角的重新调整: 西方纪录片中的“中国制造”

摘要: 西方关于中国的纪录片一直受制于东方主义视角的框架, 例如《中国教会被袭记》(1900) 和《中国之抗战》(1944) 中对战争的纪实, 《北京及其周边》(1910) 和《上海大世界》(1929) 中的游记, 以及《中国》(1972) 和《中国影像》(1974) 中对共产主义乌托邦的探索。随着中国制造业产量的全球性增长, “中国制造”已成为西方纪录片浪潮中反复出现的主题。BBC的《中国人要来了》(2011) 和《中国创造》(2016) 在中国引发了热烈讨论, 揭示了东方主义视角的重新调整。与将中国定位为评判对象或外部威胁的《中国人要来了》不同, 《中国创造》将叙事重心转向技术能力和创新, 突出了中国在快速工业和技术崛起过程中面临的挑战。本文分析了“中国制造”形象的转变, 认为尽管《中国创造》中的话语体系已有所调整, 但其运作仍受东方主义视角的支配。而从制造业向创新的转型, 应被理解为在全球权力关系变迁背景下的一种战略性调整。

关键词: 纪录片; 中国制造; 东方主义; 《中国人要来了》; 《中国创造》

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1. Introduction

In the contemporary Western imagination, “Made in China” has become one of the most visible and contested markers through which China’s national image is understood. Far from a neutral label of origin, “Made in China” has long functioned as a condensed signifier linking China to mass production, low-cost labor, environmental degradation, and ethical controversy, shaping China’s global position. Within this representational landscape, Western documentaries play a particularly influential role in constructing and disseminating meanings attached to “Made in China.” It is noteworthy that for most of the 20th century, China remained an agrarian society, with large-scale industrial production virtually nonexistent. Western documentaries about China during this period alternately portrayed China as exotic, backward, or morally problematic through a lens aligned with Orientalist traditions. In this study, Orientalism is understood as a

historically adaptive discursive framework through which Western societies produce, manage, and stabilize hierarchical knowledge about non-Western others. The growing visibility of Chinese factories and manufacturing landscapes in twenty-first-century documentaries therefore marks a significant shift that calls for closer examination. “Made in China” became China’s first tangible step toward integration into the global order, signaling a shift from a predominantly agrarian economy toward industrial participation and positioning China as a modern actor capable of engaging with internationally recognized standards of production. In this article, “Made in China” is not confined to the production of everyday consumer goods, but is understood as China’s structural position within global production networks, encompassing infrastructure development, technological capacity, design, software, and institutional capability.

As a century-old public broadcaster with global influence, the BBC has long been regarded as a benchmark of documentary professionalism and credibility both domestically and internationally (Seaton, 2021). Its documentaries about China offer a particularly revealing case through which to explore broader patterns in Western media representations. This article focuses on two BBC documentaries, *Chinese Are Coming* (Rowlatt, 2011) and *Click: Designed in China* (Kelly, 2016), to investigate how the BBC’s portrayal of “Made in China” reflects a partial readjustment within an enduring Orientalist framework. *The Chinese Are Coming* focuses primarily on the global impact of Chinese manufacturing, and examines how Chinese workers, businesses, and capital are reshaping societies across continents such as Africa, South America, and North America. But it has been criticized for exhibiting Western-centric biases, with misleading elements in its title, selection of materials and perspective (Rodrigue, 2018, Zhang, 2013). It consists of two episodes, each running approximately 60 minutes. And *Click: Designed in China* shifts attention to China’s internal transformation, examining how Chinese firms seek to move beyond imitation of established Western industries toward their own technological innovation. The series consists of 3 episodes, each lasting 25 minutes. While containing some negative commentary, it acknowledges the social transformations brought about by China’s technological advancements (Xiao & Wang, 2021).

Although these documentaries attracted relatively limited public debate in the West, they ignited significant controversy among Chinese audiences, as evidenced by their critical reviews on Douban, a platform where Chinese users post and exchange film reviews. This asymmetrical reception underscores the sensitivity of Western representations of China and provides a compelling rationale for examining these documentaries. Through a comparative analysis of *The Chinese Are Coming* and *Click: Designed in China*, this paper argues that *The Chinese Are Coming* represents a more conventional form of Orientalism, one that constructs China primarily as an external economic and social threat. By contrast, *Click: Designed in China* reflects a readjustment of Orientalist gaze, which is not only in the shifting meaning of “Made in China”, but also in how the documentary depicts China confronting challenges that Western societies themselves once faced, as well as problems increasingly shared across advanced industrial economies. However, these shifts

have not dismantled the underlying hierarchy of representation. Although China is viewed as modern and innovative, this recognition is achieved within a Western narrative framework that continues to shape visibility, credibility, and interpretive authority.

2. China in Western Documentaries

The representation of China in Western documentaries over the twentieth century reveals a shifting configuration of geopolitical access, ideological struggle, and aesthetic strategy. Western documentary visions of China moved from exotic spectacle (1949-1978) to political confrontation (1949-1978) and, eventually, to pluralism (1978-2000). Each phase reflects not only changing realities within China, but also transformations in Western worldviews and media institutions.

Documentaries from 1900 to 1949 were characterized by their exoticism and ethnographic focus. In the early twentieth century, Western cameras entered China alongside colonial expansion, missionary activity, and commercial exploration. China was framed as a mysterious and backward “Other,” suitable for ethnographic display and visual curiosity. Most films from this period survive only in fragments, primarily consisting of newsreels, travelogues, and short actuality films, numbering approximately 50 to 100 titles. For example, *Attack on a China Mission* (Williamson, 1900) depicts the Boxers’ assault on a Western mission compound, condensing complex anti-imperial resistance into a spectacle of chaos and foreign victimhood. *Shanghai’s Great World* (1929) centers on Shanghai’s renowned entertainment venues, guiding Western audiences through commercial amusements that blend cosmopolitan glamour with orientalist curiosity. These documentaries position China as an object of spectacle, explanation, and mediated interpretation, the tone often carried a civilizational superiority or missionary impulse of salvation. Yet even within this paradigm, exceptions emerged. *Kukan* (Scott, 1941), which documented wartime China and received an Academy Award, complicated the purely exotic frame by foregrounding endurance and national struggle.

Documentaries spanning 1949 to 1978 portrays the trajectory of Communist China. With the onset of the Cold War and the founding of the People’s Republic of China, Western access to China became severely restricted, with a handful of leftist directors and filmmakers from socialist bloc countries granted entry. Therefore, only about twenty documentaries were produced during this period. Most of these portrayed China as a utopia, emphasizing the joys of collectivism and the order of the new society, becoming visual archives supporting propaganda (Fitzpatrick, 1983). Such as Felix Greene’s *China!* (1965) explicitly sought to counter Western demonization in its narration. The most controversial was Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Chung Kuo* (1972). Rather than celebrating monumental achievements, Antonioni focused on everyday gestures, such as elderly citizens practicing tai chi, children playing in alleys, seeking an observational neutrality that bypassed official narratives. This seemingly apolitical gaze was interpreted by Chinese authorities as hostile distortion, triggering the notorious “Antonioni Incident”. The episode exposed a profound cultural misreading: what

Western documentary tradition considered humanistic realism was perceived domestically as ideological subversion. In contrast, Ivens's twelve-hour epic *How Yukong Moved the Mountains* (1976) conveyed warmth and immersion through its documentation of Chinese society during the Cultural Revolution, reflecting a more collaborative engagement. This phase highlights how documentary realism itself became a contested political terrain. Regardless of criticism or praise, these documentaries undeniably satisfied Westerners' "desire to understand China which has been closed off for a long time" (Shan, 2005, p. 290), thereby increasing China's visibility.

After 1978, Western perspectives became more complex and ambivalent. Economic reform, rapid urbanization, and social tension produced a China that could no longer be contained within a singular narrative. Following China's opening up in the 1980s, Western film crews began to visit China with increasing frequency. After remaining isolated from the world for an extended period, Deng Xiaoping's reforms transformed China into a subject more compelling than ever before. As China gradually became the "world's factory", one of the earliest documentaries about Chinese manufacturing emerged: *North China Factory* (Ianzelo & Richardson, 1980). It depicted the daily work and life within a large Chinese textile factory and its surrounding workers' community in Shijiazhuang, Hebei Province, China. But documentaries during this era still focused more on culture, family, and folklore, adopting a friendly tone that even bordered on "romanticization" (Espinet, 2014). *The Silk Road* (Suzuki et al, 1980), co-produced by NHK and Chinese partners, ignited global fascination with Chinese culture. In the meantime, the United States viewed China as a crucial ally to counter the Cold War threat from the Soviet Union. However, this friendly attitude faded with the Cold War's end and the Soviet Union's collapse. China emerged as the world's only remaining major communist nation, sparking unease in the West. Meanwhile, advances in lightweight digital technology enabled independent filmmakers to enter the field, shifting the center of gravity away from large institutional broadcasters. Documentaries adopted micro-level, problem-oriented approaches, focusing on political themes. Works such as *The Gate of Heavenly Peace* (Hinton & Gordon, 1995) attempted multi-perspective historical reconstruction. *The Dying Rooms* (Blewett & Woods, 1995) links the issue of abandoned female infants and disabled children in China to national policies and social structures. Therefore, the primary determinant of Western images of China is the West itself, not China (Mackerras, 1999).

In the aforementioned documentaries, China was positioned outside the trajectory of modern industrial capitalism, imagined as an ideological curiosity onto which Western imagination could be projected. China functions less as a self-defining subject than as a screen reflecting Western concerns, wherein the Western observer consistently assumes a superior position as the ultimate rule-maker and judge (Lu & Wu, 2025). The binary opposition between "us" and "them" is continually and ideologically reconstructed (Yang & Chen, 2023, p. 60). This mode of representation exemplifies a classical Orientalist gaze, which positions the East as a "passive reactor," while the West acts as "the spectator" (Said, 1978, p. 109).

After 2000, China gradually emerges as the world's manufacturing center, Chinese products are very common and can be purchased almost anywhere (Kauf & Tłuczak, 2016). The ubiquity label "Made in China" drew attention from Western documentaries, leading to films focusing on Chinese production lines, factory labor, and global supply chains, such as *Blue China* (Peled, 2005), *Made in China* (Cauchard, 2006), *The Chinese Are Coming* (Rowlatt, 2011), *Click: Designed in China* (Kelly, 2016), *American Factory* (Bognar & Reichert, 2019) and *Ascension* (Kingdon, 2021). Among these, *China Blue* exposes exploitative labor conditions, reinforcing a moralized and reductive image of Chinese manufacturing as synonymous with the sweatshop. Against this backdrop, *The Chinese Are Coming* shifts attention from factory interiors to the geopolitical and economic consequences of China's manufacturing dominance, signaling a move away from individualized labor suffering toward systemic comparison and national competition. In 2015, the Chinese government released the "Made in China 2025" project, marking the rise of intelligent manufacturing. The international discourse on "Made in China" has shifted from low-end, cheap, and inferior to innovative, green, and globally collaborative (Yu, 2025). World Bank data reveals that China's manufacturing value-added surpassed that of the United States for the first time in 2010, firmly ranking first in the world.¹ By 2025, China accounted for nearly 30% of global manufacturing output, emerging as a pivotal driver of worldwide industrial economic growth. Moreover, China has evolved into a "headquarter economy", with its core functions centered on R&D and design, rather than remaining a "factory economy" focused solely on assembly and processing (Kostoska et al, 2020). *Click: Designed in China* captures this transformation for the first time by foregrounding intelligent manufacturing, engineering expertise, and technological creativity. It repositions China from an external challenger to an active participant in the very industrial processes that had historically underpinned Western economic dominance. China was no longer imagined as outside modernity, but as participating in and even surpassing the very industrial processes that underpinned Western economic dominance.

The choice of *The Chinese Are Coming* and *Click: Designed in China* is therefore deliberate. Both of them are among the BBC documentaries that engage with Chinese manufacturing, making them particularly significant sites for examining how "Made in China" is constructed. On the one hand, while *The Chinese Are Coming* foregrounds low-cost production, overseas expansion, and economic anxiety, *Click: Designed in China* shifts the narrative toward high-end manufacturing and technological innovation within China. This shift is marked not only by a spatial reorientation from African markets to domestic laboratories, technology firms, and research centers, but also by a discursive reframing from mass production to creativity and design. On the other hand, the epistemic position of the Western presenter appears to change. In the earlier documentary, the host assumed the role of observer and evaluator, assessing China's global influence from a

¹ Chen, Yujie. (2024, September 10). "China has become the world's largest manufacturing powerhouse! Industrial economic strength has leaped significantly." *CNR News*. https://news.cnr.cn/native/gd/kx/20240910/t20240910_526897051.shtml.

critical distance. In contrast, *Click: Designed in China* positions the presenter more as a participant and experiencer, engaging directly with devices, startups, and digital platforms. The range of interview subjects also expands to Chinese CEOs, engineers, and university students, suggesting a more diversified and seemingly forward-looking portrait of Chinese modernity.

However, this progression does not signify a departure from Orientalism. Rather, the shifting portrayal of Chinese manufacturing should be understood as a historically conditioned response to changing global power relations and to the evolving meaning of “Made in China.” As China’s industrial and technological capabilities have become increasingly visible, Western narratives have adjusted accordingly. This paper argues that although *Click: Designed in China* presents a more positive depiction of Chinese manufacturing, highlighting technological advancement, it nevertheless continues to operate within an Orientalist framework. The documentary’s seemingly affirmative narrative does not fundamentally challenge the Western gaze; instead, it rearticulates an Orientalist perspective that continues to interpret China through externally defined criteria of modernization and progress.

3. Reinterpreting the Meaning of “Made in China”

“Made in China” has long been regarded as synonymous with rampant imitation, poor quality, and low prices, contributing to persistent negative perceptions surrounding Chinese manufacturing. These perceptions are not limited to media representations but are also reflected in consumer evaluations. For example, consumer’s watch evaluation is significantly lowered when made-in country is changed from Swiss to China, despite identical product specifications (Wu & Fu, 2007). It is important to acknowledge that such issues have indeed been present in Chinese manufacturing and are rooted in specific historical and structural conditions, including late industrialization and integration into global value chains. However, as China’s industrial capacity and technological sophistication have evolved, these characteristics no longer represent the meanings attached to “Made in China”. This gradual shift is reflected in *Click: Designed in China*, which challenges the early stereotypes of Chinese manufacturing.

The label “Made in China” is neither historically stable nor inherently negative; rather, its meaning has been continuously reconstructed within shifting global economic relations and Western discursive frameworks. The very concept of “Made in ...” did not originate in China but emerged from late nineteenth-century Western trade regulation, particularly the British Merchandise Marks Act of 1887, which required imported goods to display their country of origin. Initially intended as a protectionist measure, this system later formed the basis of what scholars call the “country-of-origin effect” (Bilkey & Nes, 1982). In this sense, the label “Made in China” was from its inception embedded within a Western epistemic structure rather than a purely domestic Chinese identity marker.

The large-scale global visibility of “Made in China” developed much later, primarily from the 1980s onward, following China’s economic reforms and integration into global production networks. The

widespread international circulation of the “Made in China” coincided with the rise of export-processing industries in coastal regions. Through subcontracting arrangements and labor-intensive manufacturing transferred from East Asian economies, China became a crucial node in Western-dominated supply chains. At this stage, however, the label remained relatively “invisible” in Western discourse: it signified low production costs and abundant labor but did not yet carry strong symbolic meaning. Just as the Chinese female workers at Meteor Electronics, a Hong Kong subcontractor for a prominent European car brand, were imagined as “obedient, tolerant, and docile bodies” suited only to the factory machine (Pun, 2005), China itself, on a global scale, positioned as a compliant producer operating in the shadows of Western brands, rather than as an independent industrial actor.

The meaning of “Made in China” underwent a major discursive shift in the late 1990s and 2000s, particularly after China’s accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001. As Chinese exports surged and began to affect Western labor markets, the label became increasingly politicized. Product safety controversies, such as the 2007 pet food scandal² and the concurrent toy recalls due to lead contamination³, led to a period of reputational crisis in which “Made in China” became synonymous with cheapness, poor quality, and potential danger. Western media narratives frequently framed Chinese manufacturing as both an economic threat and a moral risk, reinforcing a binary opposition between a supposedly regulated, safe West and a chaotic, rule-breaking East.

After the global financial crisis, however, the symbolic meaning of the label began to loosen and diversify. The expansion of high-technology production in China, most visibly through global consumer electronics supply chains, complicated earlier assumptions about quality and capability: the perception of Chinese manufacturing has shifted from “low quality” to “efficient imitation.” Well-documented examples include the replication of Western consumer electronics designs, the emergence of domestic platforms modeled on foreign counterparts, and the production of low-cost analogues of branded goods. In consumer electronics, particularly during the 2000s and early 2010s, a range of domestically produced mobile phones adopted design features and interface logics associated with established Western brands such as Samsung and Nokia.⁴ The term “Shanzhai” emerged from this context, specifically referring to creative and ironic imitations (Steinmüller, 2022). Similar patterns were evident in household appliances and light industrial goods, where Chinese manufacturers initially followed technological pathways pioneered by Japanese and European firms such as Sony, Panasonic, and Siemens. In the digital sphere, China’s social platform WeChat is often seen as an imitation of Facebook and WhatsApp, while the e-commerce platform Taobao is frequently compared to eBay or Amazon. These practices are closely tied to China’s position within global value chains, where rapid scaling

² Reuters. (2007, April 10). “Menu Foods again widens pet food recall.” *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/economy/menu-foods-again-widens-pet-food-recall-idUSN10443845/>.

³ Reuters. (2007, August 22). “Lead causes more U.S. recalls of China-made toys.” *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/lead-causes-more-us-recalls-of-china-made-toys-idUSN22445323/>.

⁴ Han, B. C. (2017). *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese* (P. Hurd, Trans.). MIT Press. (Original work published 2011)

and cost efficiency took primacy over originality during this period. While narratives of plagiarism persisted, reinforcing Orientalist logic that non-Western production was incapable of genuine creativity, China's agile responsiveness in adapting supply chains demonstrated its underlying technological capabilities.

From the mid-2010s onward, the label entered a new phase characterized by both positive reassessment and renewed geopolitical tension. Industrial upgrading policies and the globalization of Chinese technology firms contributed to the emergence of alternative associations such as innovation, technological sophistication, and value for money. Chinese brands increasingly moved from original equipment manufacturing toward brand ownership, challenging the earlier hierarchy between Western creativity and Chinese labor. Chinese firms such as Huawei, DJI, and BYD are frequently cited as emblematic of a shift toward innovation-driven production, particularly in telecommunications infrastructure, drone technology, and electric vehicles. Importantly, their significance lies not only in domestic success but in their capacity to shape global markets and everyday life beyond China. Huawei's telecommunications technologies are integral to global network infrastructures, having built 70 percent of the 4G networks in Africa.⁵ DJI has come to dominate the global consumer and professional drone market.⁶ And BYD has surpassed Tesla to become the world's largest electric vehicle manufacturer⁷, with its models gaining increasing popularity in Western cities. These developments complicate earlier stereotypes of Chinese manufacturing as derivative and imitation, prompting a recalibration of how "Made in China" is understood. Rather than simply reversing negative perceptions, the growing global visibility of Chinese innovation forces Western media and audiences to renegotiate established assumptions, creating the conditions for discursive readjustment.

Understanding these historical layers is essential for analyzing contemporary representations of Chinese industry. Rather than treating "Made in China" as a fixed stereotype, it is more accurate to view it as a contested signifier whose meaning has been repeatedly renegotiated in response to global economic restructuring and Western ideological concerns. The documentaries examined in this study participate in this ongoing reinterpretation, reflecting a moment in which the symbolic boundaries of Chinese manufacturing were being redefined.

For example, representations in *The Chinese Are Coming* frequently equated "Made in China" with inconsistency, unreliability, and inferiority. The film illustrates this through two symbolic cases: one is a comparison between Chinese chickens and local Zambian chickens; another is a quality contest between Chinese-made bikinis and Brazilian bikinis. In the first episode, the host arrived at a Zambian chicken market. He engages with a local chicken seller, Jacob, who complains that Chinese sellers have taken "99 percent" of

⁵ Sacks, D. (2021, March 29). "China's Huawei is winning the 5G race. Here's what the United States should do to respond." *Council on Foreign Relations*. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/china-huawei-5g>.

⁶ Bremer, M. K., & Grieco, K. A. (2025, August 25). "The Future Is Being Delivered by Chinese Drones." *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/08/25/china-united-states-drones-logistics-military-commerce-technology/>.

⁷ Jolly, J. (2026, January 2). "China's BYD overtakes Tesla as world's biggest electric car seller." *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2026/jan/02/china-byd-tesla-worlds-biggest-electric-car-seller-clon-musk-donald-trump-ev>.

the business. The comparison is then staged by juxtaposing a locally raised Zambian chicken with a Chinese one, with “quality” established as the primary evaluative criterion. Close-up shots of the two chickens precede any tasting: the Chinese chicken is framed with reddish skin on its breast, connoting poor health, while the Zambian chicken is presented as visually “healthy” and natural. Through this visual contrast, a value judgment is already implied before any empirical assessment takes place. The host then proposes tasting both chickens to compare flavors. Jacob interjects, “Between the Zambian, good, big chickens, and the bad-looking Chinese chickens”, a remark that carries an overtly derogatory tone. Rather than interrogating this framing, the presenter dismisses it with the ironic comment, “not that Jacob is biased, of course,” thereby normalising the discriminatory discourse and rendering it unproblematic. After both chickens were cooked, the camera zoomed in on the host tasting the Chinese chicken, capturing his expression as he sampled it, with Zambians gathered around awaiting the verdict. Seconds later, the host concludes that the meat is “quite tough.” By contrast, before tasting the Zambian chicken, he offers a favourable assessment, noting that it “looks whiter” and “feels a little bit more tender to me.” And the final verdict, “The Zambian chicken tastes better”, is met with applause and cheers from the surrounding crowd, transforming an individual sensory judgment into a collectively affirmed conclusion. A similar comparative logic is reproduced in the second episode. The host brings a low-cost bikini purchased at a local market to a Brazilian bikini factory and points to its “Made in Brazil” label when questioning a female worker about its origin. She immediately rejects the label’s claim and asserts that the product must be Chinese, because “the finishing is bad, the type of Lycra and the colors.” Here, “Made in China” functions not as a neutral indication of origin but as a readily identifiable marker of low quality, one that can allegedly be recognised through visual and tactile inspection alone. Taken together, these sequences rely on highly conventionalised cross-national comparisons to position Chinese products within a persistent hierarchy of value. Through selective framing, evaluative language, and audience-aligned editing, the documentary repeatedly associates “Made in China” with inferiority, roughness, and unreliability, thereby reinforcing a broader discursive stereotype in which Chinese commodities are rendered legible primarily through their presumed deficiencies.

As Chinese manufacturing increasingly demonstrates technical competence and competitive standards, this assumption is revised. In the first episode of *Click: Designed in China*, one of the most memorable scenes unfolds on the world’s longest glass-bottomed bridge, a 430-meter-long structure crossing Zhangjiajie’s grand canyon. The BBC host and his team traveled to the site to test whether this bold feat of Chinese engineering truly lived up to officials’ claims of strength. “So this is how they going to assuage people’s fear of glass bridge.” The experimental walkway consists of three layers of toughened glass held together by glue. As recorded by the camera, the host wielded a heavy sledgehammer and made the first attempt. The glass cracked instantly, eliciting gasps from the crowd. “It looks like you can see the top glass has shattered here.” The host then repeatedly struck the same spot, finally found that though the cracks spread, the glass remained structurally intact, proving the safety of the glass bridge. Exhausted, the host finally acknowledged the bridge’s

sturdiness: “I think this might be safe.” This sequence demonstrates the high quality of Chinese-made products by testing glass manufactured in China. At the same time, this event invites a more layered interpretation than a simple narrative of technological validation. On one level, the willingness of Chinese engineers and local authorities to permit such an aggressive test can be read as an expression of confidence in the material integrity of the structure China’s broader engineering capabilities. The act of allowing a foreign media team to strike the bridge publicly signals openness and a readiness to submit technological achievements to international scrutiny. Yet this apparent openness simultaneously exposes a deeper asymmetry. The very fact that the test is initiated, performed, and interpreted by a British host reveals a normalized hierarchy of authority. The hammer does not merely test the glass; it performs a historically embedded privilege to evaluate, judge, and ultimately authorize the legitimacy of non-Western technological claims. In this sense, the scene reflects not mutual exchange but a one-directional ritual in which China’s confidence is displayed through its consent to be examined, while Britain’s authority is reaffirmed through its capacity to examine. What is striking, then, is not simply that the bridge survives the test, but that such a test is framed as necessary. The assumption that Chinese engineering requires external verification reproduces an Orientalist logic in a readjusted form: recognition is granted, but only after passing through a Western epistemic filter. The scene thus exemplifies that *Click: Designed in China*, despite its progress, has not relinquished inherited structures of interpretive dominance.

Combining the comparative analysis of *The Chinese Are Coming* and *Click: Designed in China*, it becomes evident that the “Made in China” label has undergone a significant transformation. This shift emerges within the global narrative through the reshaping of the nation’s image as a technological powerhouse, necessitating a “readjustment” of Orientalist gaze within the documentaries. It embraces the universal values of technological modernization while simultaneously incorporating China’s “otherness” into an interpretable and consumable global cultural framework through specific narrative structures. Rather than being dismantled, classical Orientalism is selectively modified to accommodate new material realities.

4. Readjusting Orientalism: Selective Memory and Industrial Modernity

Beyond the shift in stereotypes surrounding “Made in China” discussed above, this paper argues that *The Chinese Are Coming* represents a continuation of traditional Orientalism, whereas *Click: Designed in China* constitutes an adjustment to Orientalism.

Compared to the 44.31% negative content⁸ found in *The Chinese Are Coming*, the narrative of *Click: Designed in China* is more positive. One of the most significant constraints shaping *The Chinese Are Coming* lies in its reliance on historically familiar imperial frameworks to interpret Chinese economic engagement in Africa. The documentary frames China’s growing presence in Africa as a form of emergent empire, implicitly drawing on analogies that resonate with Britain’s own imperial experience throughout 19th and 20th century.

⁸ Sun, W. (2016). *The image of China in a BBC documentary and Chinese audiences’ reactions: The case of “The Chinese Are Coming”* (Master’s thesis, Simon Fraser University).

From the 16th century to the early 20th century, Britain established a global colonial system through military conquest, trade monopolies, and colonial rule. The sheer number of its colonies earned it the title of “Sun-Never-Set Empire”. The train the host rode on his way to Angola originated from that era: “...this railway was built by the British, they brought in labour from across the empire, from Africa and India, to build this incredible construction...And now the Chinese are helping to reconstruct it.” Notably, the host places a marked pause and stress on “the Chinese, a delivery technique that subtly highlights the individuals responsible for the railway renovation and invites interpretive attention beyond the propositional content of the statement. The host then mentioned the price Angola paid for this railway: “The renovation of this railway is directly linked to the oil I saw being shipped out of Luanda harbour. In return for the oil, China provides billions of dollars of loans and cheap finance to Angola...Carried out by Chinese companies, mostly with Chinese workers.” As the narrator reached the final sentence, the camera focused on the Africans gazing out the window. Since the railway project was constructed by “a Chinese state company”, the host was unable to conduct an interview: “Perhaps it’s because some critics have seen these kind of deals as one-sided in favour of China, ‘Yes, the Angolans get a refurbished railway, but the Chinese get the oil and the lucrative construction contracts’.” Although claims as “creative treatment of actuality” (Grierson, 1971, p. 13), documentary film shares the same “constructedness” (Nichols, 2010, p. 111) as fictions. The dual nature of documentary distinguishes it from other genres, compelling audiences to place unwavering trust in the facts presented. This had led some African netizens in the documentary’s comment section to believe they “are being exploited,” claiming China has made no contribution to improving the situation of African people: “They are merely tapping resources back to their homeland”.⁹ Others equate the actions of Chinese companies with the slave trade, asserting that China treats Africa as a “giant plantation”.¹⁰

Every image and line of dialogue on the screen participates in the exercise of discursive power, shaping how meaning is produced, framed, and interpreted. Foucault emphasizes examining the “infinitesimal” mechanisms of power from a bottom-up perspective. The linguistic characteristics and textual organization of documentary texts are not accidental, but rather strategies consciously employed by filmmakers to achieve meanings (Cao, 2014). This segment of the documentary encourages viewers to interpret China’s overseas investments primarily as exploitative and self-serving, as if China builds railways to secure African oil and lucrative returns through minimal financing while also providing jobs for Chinese workers. However, when compared with empirical evidence of China’s actual engagement models in Africa, this representative

⁹ T. J. (2011, August 25). This comment is pre-watching the documentary, and I will post another post-doc. As an African, I can safely say that... [Comment on The Chinese Are Coming]. *Top Documentary Films*. <https://topdocumentaryfilms.com/chinese-are-coming/>.

¹⁰ Wolf Inglewood. (2011, September 20). The China aren't stupid, they want our resources and by the looks of all the huge industrial loans they are... [Comment on The Chinese Are Coming]. *Top Documentary Films*. <https://topdocumentaryfilms.com/chinese-are-coming/>.

approach becomes analytically problematic. According to Liu Feng, Deputy General Manager of China Railway 20th Bureau Group, significant debate arose at the project's inception over whether to adopt European or Chinese standards. Historically a Portuguese colony, Angola had a preference for European standards. But Chinese enterprises ultimately won the project by offering lower bids, more reasonable timelines, and higher quality commitments.¹¹ And a wealth of policy documents, development reports, as well as region-specific studies indicate that China's aid to Africa has prioritized infrastructure development. According to official data, China has helped build more than 6,000 kilometers of railways and highways and over 80 large-scale power facilities across the continent.¹² China's direct investment stock in Africa has exceeded 40 billion dollars by the end of 2023, making it one of Africa's major sources of foreign investment.¹³ In addition, this also boosts local employment. Compared to areas without such assistance, China's aid increases local employment rates by two percentage points in regions near project sites. The long-term benefits are particularly evident in education, healthcare, as well as water and power utilities (An et al, 2025). This differs from the documentary's portrayal of China as a new colonial power, an image rooted in Britain's colonial past as an imperial power. Britain's colonial engagement with Africa was exploitative (Rodney, 1981), driven by securing raw materials for industrial accumulation rather than fostering local development. And resource extraction under British colonialism was closely intertwined with coercive labor regimes and demographic exploitation (Sadiq & Tsourapas, 2024). In many regions, African populations were subjected to forced labor, taxation systems, and land dispossession that compelled participation in colonial mining and agricultural production. These practices generated profound social dislocation, undermined indigenous economic systems, and produced long-lasting inequalities in wealth and development. Even when aid was later extended to Africa, it perpetuated the British's ingrained colonial mindset, a form of "dead aid" (Moyo, 2009) different from China's sustainable development assistance. This aid exacerbated political instability and increased African nations' external debt, thereby perpetuating the continent's dependence on its "Western donors."

Unlike *The Chinese Are Coming* which situates Chinese manufacturing primarily within overseas markets and their effects, *Click: Designed in China* focuses on domestic sites of production, design studios, start-up incubators, and innovation hubs within China. This spatial reorientation signals a significant readjustment in representational strategy. China is no longer depicted primarily as a disruptive force acting upon others, but as a society grappling with the internal consequences of its own rapid industrial and technological ascent. Yet this shift does not entail the abandonment of Orientalist logic; rather, it marks its recalibration.

¹¹ Lu, Yanan. (2014, August 14). "The 1,344-kilometer Benguela Railway was fully completed on the 13th: 'Chinese standards' speed up Angolan railways." *People's Daily*. <http://finance.people.com.cn/n/2014/0814/c1004-25461296.html>.

¹² China International Development Cooperation Agency. (2023, November 10). "China's international development cooperation in the new era." https://en.cidca.gov.cn/2023-11/10/c_937875.htm.

¹³ Yidaiyilu.gov.cn. (2024, September 3). "Empowering China-Africa cooperation with the theory and practice of New Structural Economics." <https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/0EIEH4V7.html>.

Environmental imagery provides a clear illustration of this adjustment. As the documentary explains, the explosive growth in automobile production, coupled with increasingly congested urban roads, has generated massive levels of vehicle exhaust that accumulate into a dense, lingering haze. “In 1978 there were just 1.3 million vehicles on China’s roads. Today there are 279 million. The smog is sometimes so bad it’s breathtaking.” Following the host to a skyscraper, the camera lingers on Beijings’ iconic landmarks - the Olympic Tower, the Water Cube, and the Bird’s Nest Olympic Stadium - now barely visible as they vanish into a haze of gray smog. “There are mountains over there, trust me. Not that you’ve got a chance to see them today.” This visual obscuration functions as a cinematic pause, casting China’s industrial achievements under a cloud of doubt and inviting reflection on the costs of “unrestrained development.” However, by attributing environmental degradation almost exclusively to domestic factors such as automobile overproduction, the documentary detaches pollution from the global production system in which Western consumption and waste export play a constitutive role. Following reform and opening-up, China’s manufacturing industry witnessed rapid growth, driving surging demand for raw materials like plastics, paper, and metals. Importing waste materials proved cheaper than extracting virgin resources and helped fill gaps in domestic supply chains. Consequently, a comprehensive recycled resources industry chain for importing this “foreign garbage” emerged in China, generating substantial economic benefits. However, developed countries export electronic waste and recyclable plastics to developing nations, not only reducing waste disposal costs of the former, but also shifting environmental and health risks to the latter. Documentaries like Canadian filmmaker Jennifer Baichwal’s *Manufactured Landscapes* (2006) and Chinese director Wang Jiuliang’s *Plastic China* (2015) explicitly depict the reality of environmental contamination triggered by imported plastic waste. Stoett (2024) proposes this constitutes a form of “plastic waste colonialism”: developed nations exploit the global waste trade system to export plastic waste under the guise of “recyclability,” effectively dumping difficult-to-process, mixed-contamination and low-value plastics onto developing countries. This practice not only diverts attention from the contradiction between economic development and environmental pollution in Western nations, exploits legal and policy loopholes for profit, but also indirectly infringes upon human rights and labor standards in developing countries, reinforcing structures of global inequality (Comolli, 2024, Shennum, 2024). Yet in the film, China remains portrayed as the “polluter” and “environmental destroyer,” rather than the “pollution sink” within the global capitalist division of labor. Environmental degradation is treated as a national failure of China rather than as the outcome of a global production system. Through this framing, Western environmental anxieties are externalized, allowing moral responsibility to be displaced onto China while structural inequalities remain unexamined.

A similar logic operates in the documentary’s portrayal of labor. In the second episode of *Click: Designed in China*, the documentary crew visited Huawei’s Shenzhen campus, and captured employees rushing into the

cafeteria in groups, eating quickly to maximize their break time. Roll-up beds stored under their desks revealed that long hours at the office were routine. As the host said, “it’s perfectly normal here.” Unlike the moralistic accusations of “sweatshops” in earlier Western documentaries, these scenes are largely presented through observation without overt condemnation. This film avoids portraying Huawei as an abusive employer, instead embedding these scenes within a broader narrative of China’s rapid technological ascent, implicitly linking extreme work intensity to competitiveness, speed, and innovation. Yet this apparent restraint does not neutralize power relations. Instead, intense labor discipline is reframed as a functional requirement of innovation and global competitiveness. China is thus constructed as a space where the pressures of contemporary capitalism are rendered unusually visible and concentrated, positioning Chinese workers as subjects who absorb the costs of technological acceleration on behalf of the global market.

The documentary’s final turn toward automation further extends this recalibration. At the end of the episode, the host visited a factory in Dongguan, a highly industrialized city in the coastal area of China, and mentioned the widespread automation of production lines. “...factories are looking to automate even largest way of their production line, case in point, Foxconn recently revealed that it had more than halved its workforce in one factory replacing 60,000 workers with robots since 2014.” As the lens shifts from human labour to the machines replacing workers, concerns over job displacement and technological redundancy are no longer framed as uniquely Chinese problems. In this context, China functions less as a moral “other” than as an agent of the future, through which broader concerns about automation and the social consequences of technological acceleration are projected. Rather than isolating labour issue as a uniquely Chinese problem, the documentary uses China as an anticipatory lens to articulate concerns that resonate within Western societies themselves.

Critiques of China’s labor intensity and environmental degradation gain a different resonance when placed alongside the historical experience of Western industrialization. During Britain’s Industrial Revolution, severe air pollution, overcrowded cities, and hazardous working conditions were widely documented and debated. Recalling these histories does not serve to excuse present conditions elsewhere, nor to invert moral judgment. Rather, it situates current representations of China within a broader, historically recurring pattern of industrial development. When China is criticized for phenomena that were once constitutive of Britain’s own path to modernity, such critiques reveal less about China’s exceptionalism than about the selective historical memory embedded within contemporary Western discourse. As Roh et al (2015) said, Orientalism defines a modern West by producing an oppositional and premodern East. Now China’s material and technological capacities become increasingly difficult to dismiss, Orientalist discourse no longer relies primarily on portraying China as backward or premodern. Instead, it repositions China as having progressed too rapidly, too intensive, and at too high a social and environmental cost, thereby accommodating empirical evidence of modernization while preserving hierarchical distinctions.

Taken together, these representational shifts illustrate a readjustment of Orientalist gaze. *The Chinese Are Coming* exposes China's disruptive influence on other nations, while *Click: Designed in China* acknowledges China's material and technological prowess while revealing the challenges it faces amid its own rapid industrial and technological rise. Western societies thus negotiate their own unresolved anxieties about modernity, sustainability, and technological change.

5. Conclusion

If *The Chinese Are Coming* can be understood as representative of a more traditional form of Orientalism which frames China primarily through threat, disruption, and external impact, *Click: Designed in China* exemplifies a readjustment of this discourse, reconfiguring Orientalism to accommodate China's increasingly undeniable industrial and technological capacities. This shift is not isolated. Before the escalation of geopolitical tensions, particularly prior to the United States-China trade war that began in 2018, Western media produced a number of documentaries that adopted a comparatively open or even optimistic tone toward China's economic and technological development, including *Chinese New Year: The biggest celebration on Earth* (Locke, 2016), *The Story of China* (BBC, 2016), and *American Factory* (Bognar & Reichert, 2019). Even in February 2025, the BBC released a short feature openly praising China's technological achievements, titled *DeepSeek, TikTok, Temu: How China is taking the lead in tech*. Since 2018, such documentaries have become relatively scarce. These developments suggest that *Click: Designed in China* should be read as an early indicator of a broader readjustment within Western documentary discourse on China during the relatively cooperative phase of Sino-Western relations in the early 2010s. Within this context, *Click: Designed in China* begins to acknowledge China not as a site of cheap labor or imitation, but as a consequential actor within global systems of production and innovation.

However, this recognition does not signal a departure from Orientalist frameworks. While *Click: Designed in China* concedes China's expanding technological capacity, this recognition remains mediated through Western interpretive authority and evaluative frameworks. China's development is acknowledged, yet it continues to be interpreted, validated, and contextualized from a Western epistemic standpoint. By comparing *The Chinese Are Coming* and *Click: Designed in China*, this paper therefore demonstrates not only the semantic shift of "Made in China" from low-cost manufacturing toward technological capability, but also a transformation in the operation of Orientalist gaze. This readjustment is closely tied to China's growing comprehensive national power, which renders outright denial increasingly untenable while leaving existing hierarchies of interpretation largely intact. Importantly, such adjustments remain fluid and contingent rather than linear or stable. Moments of recognition may coexist with renewed suspicion or critique, reflecting the shifting dynamics of global politics and media discourse.

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