The Missionary Complex: American perspective of China over a hundred years - a critical analysis of National Geographic magazine between 1888-1998

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The National Geographic Magazine, flagship of the National Geographic Society, has long been a lens through which the Americans view the world and has great influence in shaping public opinion. Since 1888, the magazine has established its credibility as a scientific journal and has made its readers accept whatever it reported as truth, thereby permitting the ethical assumptions embedded within it to remain unchallenged. However, the scientific journal has been involved as much political and ideological agenda setting in its covering of China as other non-scientific journals, and has been a major force in the image shaping of China in recent history.

A critical reading of the magazine’s articles about China provided a clear understanding of how the magazine had looked at China and framed the image of China by American values. By the 192 articles covering China over the past 112 years, geographers and their professional institutions had played in shaping or reinforcing American stereotypes and ideologies by framing the image of China according to American interest. The “missionary complex”, by which Americans represented "enlightenment," the pinnacle of the hierarchy, settled as the mainstream of American ideology and reflected in the covering of China over the years. Furthermore, the editorial staff of the magazine holds an obvious resentment against Chinese Communist and clings closer to the old expectation that American can save China, if not for Christ at least for democracy, human rights advocacy and commercial ventures that to convert China to the American way. A thorough reading with a critical eye of the magazine’s covering of China gave a view of China that was rather politic than scientific.

Frame analysis is applied to the study. By studying the sample articles that are related to China of the magazine between 1888 and 1998, we will see how the journalists had selected elements that are for a certain assumption, emphasis or designed context. Portraying a foreign country, journalists usually bear in mind with the concerns and conceptions from their home country’s point of view. As to China and the U.S. whose culture, history, tradition and value are in great difference with each other, such framing effect is even more evidence. Thereby, frame analysis helps us find out what is in the mind of the author over the topic he/she writes about.