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'China Inside Out': A Global Panorama On a Rising Nation

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One of the unexpected things about "China Inside Out," the ABC News documentary airing tonight, is how little it shows of China. That turns out not to matter, or to limit the excellence of the report's look at how and why all the predictions about this being "the Chinese century" are coming true. And whether we ought to be encouraged or frightened by that.

Correspondent Bob Woodruff speaks Mandarin Chinese, not a common skill among TV reporters, but he gets little chance to show off in the course of the program -- an illuminating hour that takes viewers to Angola, Brazil, Cambodia, the United States and, yes, China.

Network documentaries about global economics are about as common as existential seminars on "The View." But Woodruff, executive producer Tom Yellin and others involved in "China Inside Out" make sure that viewers will be involved, too; the report is a model of clarity and insight, a compelling primer on how changes in China are reverberating throughout the rest of the world, and why this industrious revolution must not be underestimated.

Near the beginning of the hour, Woodruff stands in Tiananmen Square, where his career in journalism began in 1989. The story he's reporting now is hugely different from the conflict he covered then: "China is changing faster than any other country on the planet," he says. "China has gone global."

Yes, Ted Koppel anchored an exhaustive and seemingly definitive report on China mere weeks ago on the Discovery Channel. And some of the facts and observations in "China Inside Out" are similar or identical to those Koppel already made -- as when it is again noted that "China has helped more people out of poverty than any other country in history."

But Woodruff looks at China's accomplishments and challenges from different angles, from perspectives that put the changes in a different and arguably less provincial light. It isn't only about how China's changes affect the United States, but also how the whole world is responding. In Angola, Brazil and Cambodia, Woodruff shows how China is effectively creating "a new world map with China at the center," and demonstrates how and why the Chinese century has come to be.

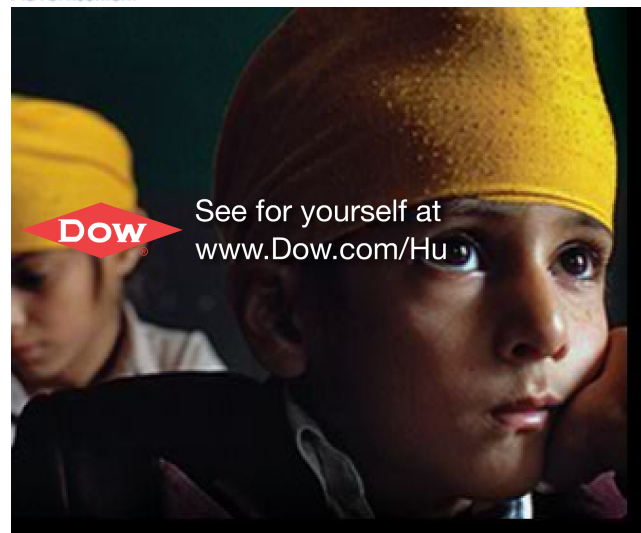
Thus we discover how China beat the West to the punch in coming to the rescue of Angola after the country was devastated by a terrible civil war -- even as the United States and the United Kingdom ignored the possibilities. Chinese influence reaches even into the rain forest of Brazil and its booming soy crop, and into Cambodia, where the Chinese see opportunity even as the West pulls back.

The broadcast is nothing if not timely, with the Beijing Olympics starting Friday and President Bush making a conspicuous visit. Woodruff and company could hardly know that China would also be in the news this week because of an earthquake that hit the same region as the devastating quake of this past May.

Woodruff continues to make a dramatic recovery from the traumatic brain injury he suffered in January 2006, while covering the Iraq war for ABC News. A convoy in which he was riding was hit by an explosive device about 12 miles north of Baghdad, and Woodruff, after recovering from his visible injuries, was left with a condition called expressive aphasia, which limits his ability to communicate -- conceivably one of the worst ailments a reporter could suffer.

In addition to Woodruff's expertise, the documentary is populated with experts and authorities who contribute to the impact.

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Perhaps the pithiest is a familiar figure to viewers of ABC's "This Week With George Stephanopoulos": Fareed Zakaria, editor of international editions for Newsweek, which is owned by The Washington Post Co. Zakaria sees the implications of China's metamorphosis as seminally important.

"You can't stop China's rise," he says. "All you can do is make sure that the United States is positioned to take advantage of that rise. . . . We can either ride this wave," he adds ominously, "or we can drown in it."

China Inside Out: Bob Woodruff Reports (one hour) airs tonight at 10 on Channel 7.

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