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A World Operating in the Red

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"AT NIGHT CHINAMEN JUMP / ON ASIA WITH A THUMP," THE POET FRANK O'HARA WROTE IN THE EARLY 1950S, and continued, "while in our willful way / we, in secret, play / affectionate games / and bruise our knees / like [China's shoes](#)."

For a wacky avant-garde poem more than half a century old, that's not a bad summation of "China Inside Out: Bob Woodruff Reports," ABC's thoroughly prosaic, factual, and sober documentary, which airs tomorrow at 10 p.m., just two days before the start of the Olympics in [Beijing](#). Mr. Woodruff was working as a lawyer and a teacher in Beijing when the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 shocked the world; 20 years later, he reports on the staggering growth of China's power and influence across the globe, as well as [America's](#) uncertain response to it.

For example, since O'Hara mentions "China's shoes," we could point out that 13 billion of those made in China, according to Mr. Woodruff, are purchased in America annually, many of them used to play games like basketball, which can be "affectionate" and certainly do lead to bruised knees.

And while China's population of 1.3 billion people is making that gigantic economic "thump" in Asia and elsewhere, America's earth-shaking powers seem to have diminished in contrast. At one point in "China Inside Out," the Beijing bureau chief for the Chicago Tribune, Evan Osnos, delineates the difference in stark terms: "The Chinese have this capacity to work, and to accept hardship, in ways the rest of us don't."

As a measure of that capability, CNN's Fareed Zakaria points out that China now exports as much in one day as it did in all of 1978. "It's the workshop of the world." And with a population so vast, it can effectively work around the clock — not that Mr. Zakaria seems so concerned about it. He believes China's burst into economic prominence, dwarfing anything since America first began outpacing Europe and Great Britain at the start of the 20th century, is good for the global economy and therefore good for Americans.

Something tells me, however, that Mr. Zakaria's sanguine take on the situation will not completely allay fears that something about this global economy setup — in which the Chinese fund \$1 trillion of American debt while we keep their economy humming by purchasing \$320 billion of their goods annually, from T-shirts to computer parts — doesn't quite pass the smell test.

Speaking of that \$1 trillion financing of our debt, which is the result of our inability to save more than we spend, one could be forgiven for detecting a touch of playful menace in the remark of the Chinese ambassador to the United Nations, Wang Guangya, when he says, "Is anyone [in America] arguing that we should withdraw this money?" Point taken.

"China Inside Out" is one of those skillfully wrought documentaries that squeeze a hefty amount of information, along with a subway car's-worth of talking heads, into less than an hour while simultaneously tantalizing the viewer with images from around the globe. In this case, the images come not only from China and America, but also from Angola, Brazil, and Cambodia — three countries in which China's economic and political clout has gone into overdrive while America has been preoccupied with wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the nuclear threats in North Korea and Iran.

We're all familiar with Chairman Mao's famous comment that it was "too soon to tell" what the effects of the French Revolution would be, and when listening to some of these Chinese ambassadors and politicians, one is again reminded that long-term thinking, unhampered by the kind of democratic human rights pressures faced by Western governments, is very much China's strong suit. Forty-eight out of 53 African nations now have economic agreements with China. Realpolitik rules the day, and Nancy Pelosi, Bob Geldof, and [Bono](#) are far away.

As Mr. Woodruff says, "All over Africa, Chinese leaders have been shaking hands and making deals, playing by their own rules in countries where the United States does not, or will not, do the same." While we rightly protest against genocide in a country such as Sudan, the Chinese move in and get down to business. The average Angolan earns only \$2 a day, but all over the country Chinese money is pouring in, and with it an extraordinarily rapid development of infrastructure, including roads, rails, buildings, schools, and hospitals.

But why China? After the end of Angola's 27-year civil war, which ended in 2002 with a million dead, the country expected the West to step in and help, says Alec Russell, the Johannesburg station chief for the Financial Times. The West had preconditions, however, particularly to do with the elimination of governmental corruption. The Chinese had very few preconditions, which made all the difference. China has since loaned Angola \$4 billion and receives oil in return. A similar picture emerges in Cambodia and Brazil. The Chinese government once backed the genocide of the Khmer Rouge, but now all is forgotten and business equals friendship. As for Brazil, it's all about that country's production of soy beans, 34 million tons of which (half the global trade) go to China, allowing it to develop an agriculture sufficient to feed its increasingly urban population meat as well as rice. (If you've never given soy beans much thought, this program is an eye-opener.)

Ultimately, it's as a portrait of a superpower on the rise, economically colonizing visibly poorer countries, that makes "China Inside Out" a worthwhile and thought-provoking look at the nation that is about to host the Olympic Games. One cannot entirely resist a sense of envy at the relative ruthlessness of the Chinese model. The West used to act in this way, but our moral principles rarely permit us to do so any longer. No doubt this is a good thing. But when another power steps in to fill the vacuum, transforming nations as disparate as Angola and Cambodia in a only handful of years, one has to wonder what the price of the West's moral scruples will turn out to be.

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